



JOHN W MEFFORD

AT
AN
ALEX TROUTT
THRILLER
DAWN

AT Dawn

An Alex Troutt Thriller

Book 4

Redemption Thriller Series - 4
(Includes Alex Troutt Thrillers, Ivy Nash Thrillers,
and Ozzie Novak Thrillers)

By
John W. Mefford

ALSO BY JOHN W. MEFFORD

Redemption Thriller Series

The Alex Troutt Thrillers

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AT Large (Book 2)

AT Once (Book 3)

AT Dawn (Book 4)

AT Dusk (Book 5)

AT Last (Book 6)

The Ivy Nash Thrillers

IN Defiance (Book 7)

IN Pursuit (Book 8)

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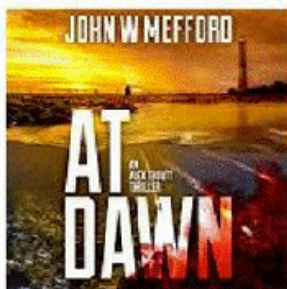
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All he could hear was the shuffle and pop of his flip-flops against the dry dirt in between his gasping breaths, each chest-burning exhale ending with a high-pitched wheeze. His asthma had been dormant for a good five or six years. What a time for it to rear its ugly head. Then again, he hadn't felt this much stress since...ever.

A crescent-shaped moon provided just enough light for the college kid to see the gray, bristled edges of dead scrub and thorny bushes scattered every few feet along his path. He caught a quick glimpse of something red and oval at his shins, and he dug his foot in the ground and did a quick three-sixty spin to avoid his second run-in in the last twenty minutes with a prickly pear cactus. His calves bore the brunt of the first tussle, at least two dozen puncture wounds. His entire body was soaked with perspiration, and he could feel the trickle of blood snaking down his hairy legs. But he didn't have time to inspect the leg wounds or the deep gashes that littered his face, stinging like he'd been attacked by a slew of South American killer bees.

Moving at a breakneck pace, the twenty-two-year-old former lacrosse star was still remarkably agile, even after being forced to snort six lines of cocaine—the same product he had hawked to hundreds of eager college kids in and around the LSU campus in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

He scooted sideways, his head constantly on a swivel, one eye scanning the darkened landscape for any number of possible dangers—deadly cobras at the top of that list. In the other direction, he searched for spotlights. The Gang of Six had held him captive for the last twenty-four hours, and he'd wondered with each minute if it would be his last. It wasn't just the nonstop brutality he'd been forced to endure—each of the six hombres getting their jollies by beating him to a pulp. Instead, it was mental torture, the endless string of threats about how they were going to pull him apart one limb at a time, slowly, over a week, so he could watch the buzzards swoop down and tear apart his own flesh as he sat tied to a chair a few feet away with the sun beating down on him.

A flicker of light against the dark sky. Was that a flashlight? His heart pounded in his chest, and he lunged two quick steps around an oversized boulder, but then tripped over smaller rocks that were embedded in the dirt. He jammed his toe. Fuck! Did he break the damn thing? He bit down on the side of his cheek until he tasted blood, while shaking his fists toward the sky.

"Why me?" he asked under his breath.

He unclenched his jaw and allowed oxygen to reach his brain. Two breaths. Leaning down, he touched the edge of his toe and nearly took a chunk out of his tongue it hurt so badly. He felt a contusion on the top of what felt like a broken bone. Crap!

He couldn't waste more time. He restarted his trek, hobbling on his heel while clutching his arm against his chest.

Another glance over his shoulder. A flash of light bounced off a nearby cliff, and his breath caught in the back of his throat. They had followed his trail and were getting closer. He picked up his pace, willing his body to ignore the agonizing pain shooting up his leg. Distant voices echoed off a nearby formation of rocks, and his pulse redlined. A tingling sensation raced through his limbs. It felt like his veins might explode and he'd bleed out under his skin. *It must be the coke.*

He cut forty-five degrees to the right, then stopped for a brief moment and ran his hand across the dirt until he found a rock the size of his palm. Turning to look over his shoulder, he could see the haze of more lights at the lip of the horizon. The herd was coming after him, all six undoubtedly seething at the prospect of hunting him down, finishing him off. Opposite his position, he could make out a cluster of miniature mesquite trees. He cocked back his arm, took three running steps, and hurled the stone as far as he could throw it. He couldn't see it flying through the air, but he could hear it crack and rattle off the trees. Not sure if that would do a whole lot of good to alter their hunting rampage, he flipped around and started running again. His toe throbbed with every bounce, and his arm felt like the final thread of ligament connecting to his shoulder was about to tear away and drop to the dirt right before his eyes. But he kept running, torquing his body to make each step longer and faster.

His wheezing had returned, but he couldn't stop now. To escape the Gang of Six, he'd run all the way to the ocean. Was he even running east? Who the hell knew? Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw more lights now flickered against the slate backdrop. They were closer. He squinted his eyes. Was that a figure in the distance?

He turned at the exact moment he heard the clopping of hooves. Dirt sprayed into his face, and he tripped, tumbling onto his injured shoulder. A horse whinnied and snorted, and the college kid could feel the earth around him shake from the tremendous pounding of hooves on the ground.

"I found the little fucker!"

The kid peeled open his eyes and spotted the man in the leather vest, one hand on the reins, the other used to curl fingers into his mouth. He released a high-pitched whistle that forced the kid to cover both ears.

"You scared little brat. You should have never run from us." He spit some type of chewing tobacco right into the kid's face. The kid gagged, wildly flailing dirt to rid his mouth of the sickening substance. The man on the horse just chuckled.

"Hombres! Get your asses over here. I found him," he yelled again.

With the man scanning the prairie for his comrades, the kid took his last chance. He quickly found a good-sized rock and grabbed a fistful of dirt. He leaped to his feet and flung the dirt into the eyes of the horse and its rider. The horse whinnied and jumped back onto its hind legs as the man screamed out,

cursing in Spanish, frantically pawing at his eyes while trying to control the pissed-off horse. The kid waited a couple of seconds, trying to aim as the man and horse jumped around. He could hear other voices yelling, heading his direction. He had one shot, and he took it. He knew the rock had connected when the man cried out. The horse bucked again and the man listed left. He'd been stunned. The kid tried to get closer, to pull the man off his ride, but the horse kept bucking wildly, nearly trampling the kid twice.

Without any other option, he took off running again, hoping the man would just pass out and fall off his horse or have a heart attack from all the drugs he'd taken. Twenty yards out, he mowed through yet another cactus. The razor-sharp daggers sliced his skin. He cried out, but he didn't slow down. In fact, it only infused him with more energy, and his pace picked up, even as brush slapped his thighs and arms. He began to have hope.

It lasted just a few seconds.

The galloping thud rumbled in his chest. Again looking over his shoulder, he could see the man slapping the side of the four-legged creature, and the horse responded with vengeance. In two quick breaths, the horse was practically even with him. The kid shifted his sights to the man in the vest. He wiped his forehead and showed his hand to the kid, then he licked it and chuckled.

The kid backpedaled while holding up his arms.

"I'll pay you. My dad's loaded. How much do you need? I can just call him and he'll wire—"

The ground disappeared, and he fell straight back, dropping about six feet. Turning over, he realized he was being poked in the back by rigid objects. He had fallen into a trench and couldn't see a damn thing. The horse plodded closer, and the kid looked up as one of the man's compadres ran up and shined a flashlight on him. He spotted the man's gnarly smile, four or five fangs and some metal, with blood curling around his crusted lips.

"You just made our job that much easier," the man in the vest said.

The kid was confused. "What?" He tried to get to his knees, but he lost his balance and fell back to the bottom of the trench, face down. And what he saw nearly stopped all blood flow in his body. He'd landed on another person. A dead man with a prickly, heavy beard, whose eyes were stuck open. The kid felt like he was lying on a porcupine. He frantically pushed off the corpse and then fell onto another dead person. This one had a gaping hole in the side of his neck.

He was in one of those mass graves he'd seen pictures of online. "What kind of perverted, sick bastards are you?"

"The kind that will kill to get our way. We don't take shit from anyone, especially some college punk who thinks he's the next Heisenberg."

Now joined by his five buddies, the Gang of Six howled with laughter, and the kid's mind drifted to another place.

Fuck it. Fuck the drugs. Fuck these damn thugs, and fuck this entire idea

he had of becoming the combination of Mark Zuckerberg and Pablo Escobar. It had all been an unmitigated disaster. An egotistical mistake of epic proportion.

He had lived a brief twenty-two years on this earth, but rarely admitted wrongdoing, let alone taking responsibility for anything he ever said or did. He had never been held accountable by any adult figure in his life: parent, coach, or teacher. No one stood up to him; he was too good an athlete and able to charm his way out of any situation, or into any girl's pants. He was wittier and more charismatic than anyone he knew, and frankly, he could outsmart every person he'd encountered.

Until now. He had been blinded by the trappings of power and money. And he had no one to blame but himself.

He looked up at the man atop his horse, wondering how much he would suffer, wondering what his last thoughts would be.

"You're just going to let me die in the middle of this shit hole? No one will ever find me. Are you that fucked up?" The kid had no filter, not as the clock ticked away the final few seconds of his life.

"We were going to draw this out, play a little game, and make an example of you. But we have important things to accomplish, my friend." The man in the vest produced a large handgun and aimed it at the kid.

"Money?" was all the kid could say, as if he were offering a treat to a pet dog.

"I don't need your stinking money. Go fuck yourself."

The man fired the weapon, striking the kid between the eyes. He crumpled like an accordion, falling on top of the other dead bodies.

The only thing left to decide was whether the grave would be covered or the buzzards would have a massive feast at dawn.

The Gang of Six ruled this barren land, and the trade that flowed through it. And they had twenty-six dead bodies in the grave to prove it.

A toddler in a soggy diaper scampered across the wet sand, his tiny feet leaving brief footprints that eventually dissolved beneath the water's edge. As his chubby legs fluttered quicker than a sand crab's, he outpaced my jogging speed—at least for a few yards—until his infectious giggle got the best of him. Even with music playing through my earbuds, I could discern what his mom was yelling while in hot pursuit: “Alshon Elijah Wiggins, stop running from me! Stop or no snack for you.” At no more than two years old, and widening the gap with each miniature stride, it appeared Alshon couldn't help but bask in the glory of his little victory.

In a full-on chuckle, he glanced over his shoulder at his mom. He then learned the hard way that the matted sand on a beach has undulations. With his very next step, he tripped and—without understanding the defensive method of holding out his arms to brace his fall—face-planted right into the muddy sand. I winced a bit as I watched his face turn upside down, but his mom got to his side in no time and wrapped him up in her arms. She happened to look up just as I passed, and we exchanged knowing winks.

I'd been there with my two kids, Erin and Luke, although neither had experienced the sheer exuberance of running down the beach on a hot summer day with nothing but the wind in your hair and ocean water spraying your face. I hoped that would all change with this vacation.

A rubber football tumbled just in front of me, and I juked to the right just in time. A throng of kids descended upon it as if it were an autographed Cam Newton football. Fully expecting the unexpected on a crowded South Padre Island beach in mid-July, I was able to keep my pulse in check. And even smile.

I'd made this jog up and down the beach a thousand times in my teen years, back when my dad occasionally challenged me to be my best, all in a quest to make it on the professional tennis tour. I had some success as an amateur—some might have said I kicked ass—but my journey to be the best also taught me important life lessons. I was naturally drawn to the mantra of No Pain, No Gain. I learned that if I wanted to be good...no, make that great, at anything, I had to out-work, out-hustle, out-think the next person. And that competitive fire was even more evident whenever I had the chance to take on the boys. Superior sex, my ass.

I released a quick grin as I dodged yet another object, this one a red Frisbee that caught too much wind and veered right into a blanket where two teenage girls were setting up their vignette for the day—a red, white, and blue umbrella donning the American flag, flanked by red beach chairs. The brunettes wore matching red sunglasses and patriotic-themed bikinis. They were obviously older than my Erin. They had curves on top of curves.

“Brat!” one of the girls yelled as she snatched the Frisbee off the blanket before a skinny, hard-charging young boy could pick it up. She held it above her head as he tried to jump and grab it.

“Run for it, kid.” She laughed as she spun around and hurled it inland toward the sand dunes. The Frisbee landed in a yellow sea of beach morning glories. Having spent ten years of my life on these beaches, I’d learned there were seventy-five types of plants. For some reason, I found that more intriguing as an adult than I ever did as a teen.

The girls gave each other high-fives while the kid ran off to fetch the Frisbee. Like so many other teens who had adult-like bodies, their maturity level had not caught up by a long shot. I thought about saying something, but the kid was already highailing back to his friends with a smile on his face.

Another thirty seconds, and I reached the levee. Back in the day, I used it as nothing more than a launching pad to propel me back north up the island beach. This time, I climbed the five-foot-high embankment made of gigantic stones and watched a tourist boat pitch upward as it chugged against small whitecaps through the Brazos Santiago Pass—the channel of water that connected the bayside with the Gulf.

I inhaled three deep breaths, the salty air mixed with gritty sand and the smell of fish from a nearby open ice chest. The warm wind whipped my face and shoulders, drying some of my perspiration. I could have stood there for hours. Even in the middle of a hot summer, the Texas beach and everything about it infused me with a healthy energy. I felt more alive than I had since my husband Mark had died at the hands of a cold-blooded killer months back.

“Here, son, it’s more of a flick of the wrist, like this.” A man cast his rod into the channel, and his son responded with a “Wow, Dad. That’s the best you’ve done all day.”

My Luke would never experience that—not with his own dad. And that saddened me, even though I’d learned that Mark was not exactly Husband of the Year material.

Another breath, and my mind was flooded with a hundred images of Brad, a coworker of mine at the FBI office in Boston. His dimpled smile, his broad shoulders, the slight wink he offered when he connected with me on a topic. We’d worked together a good couple of years, but it was about six weeks ago when I began to see him in a different light. He’d stepped in and helped Luke deal with some bullies at school, in a way that I just couldn’t do as his mom. It frankly shocked the hell out of me. Well, what followed his act of chivalry shocked me more—he found me in the garage, told me that I was beautiful and that he cared about me as more than a friend, and then gave me the most passionate kiss I could recall.

Before I lost myself in everything Brad and started feeling like a silly little girl, I jumped off the levee and began the trek back up the beach, the southerly wind mostly at my back. It didn’t take long for the sweat to pour down my face. It felt like I was taking a shower in my own sweat. I didn’t

have on a stitch of makeup, and I didn't give a rat's ass. I was all me...one hundred percent Alex Troutt, on my own turf, and it felt like a two-thousand-pound weight had been lifted off my back. The stress of the job, of trying to be the perfect double-parent, of trying to win against all that was evil had taken its toll.

Yet the thought of Brad holding me tightly against his hips in my garage still popped in my mind at various times during the day or night.

"Are you running to something or from something?"

Those were the direct words of my wise and, at times, wise-ass nanny, Ezzy, whom I loved and respected dearly—except when she tried to read my mind. While part of me was okay with avoiding reality and ignoring my true motivations, as a thirty-nine-year-old mother of two, I knew I couldn't play those games for long. Erin and Luke were too important to me to not evaluate everything in my life, and that was exactly what I'd told Ezzy two weeks ago in the kitchen, when I'd finally made the decision to take a much-needed vacation. She'd planted a hand on her Guatemalan hip and stood stock still... well, except for a little toe-tapping.

"What?" I finally looked up from my laptop. "I'm trying to get some work done here, Ezzy."

She strummed her fingers on the kitchen counter and took a sip of her herbal tea. Then her lips pressed together, but her forehead stretched to the ceiling.

"Okay, okay. I hear you...even though you're giving me the silent pressure treatment."

She sipped from her mug, but her sights remained fixed on me.

"Look, as my memory has gotten better over the last few months, I see a lot of Mark everywhere I go...the person I knew, the person I didn't. There are still days when it's not easy." I wrapped my locks around my ear, then folded my hands just in front of my laptop.

"So it's Mark you're running from?"

"What? No, I didn't say that. I might have been an assistant DA in a former life, but you're acting like an attorney, Ezzy."

"You know I've only seen Dad for about ten minutes since my wreck. And I can't wait for the kids to experience the beach the way it should be."

She nodded twice. "So that means you're running to your daddy?"

I blew out a breath. "Okay, you've got me on that one. I've told you he's a drunk, Ezzy. Who knows if he'll even sober up long enough to see us? So, scratch that one off the list. It's all about the beach and finally unwinding a little. And that's the absolute truth...so help me God." I raised a hand as if I were taking an oath, then shot her a wink.

Ezzy was almost seventy, but she was still quite pretty. The lines in her bronze skin only added to her natural beauty. She put little effort into her hair. Shades of silver and gray framed her face perfectly, and I couldn't recall her last perm. Because of a heart condition, she had recently started whipping up

much healthier dishes, many from her Guatemalan recipe book.

The edges of her full lips turned upward when she said, “Remember, I was here the night after everyone left, Dr. Alex.”

That was her affectionate nickname for me. It had something to do with a doctor on a Spanish soap opera she used to watch. I couldn’t help but smile almost every time she said it. Her comment was in reference to the night that Brad had kissed me. Even speaking about it made me tingle all over and perspire at the same time.

She then asked me if it was the kiss or how Brad interacted with Luke that might have warmed my heart, and other regions. My response was direct and truthful. “Yes.”

We both giggled.

Despite some gentle pressure from the man with golden locks and a chiseled jaw to go out on multiple dates, I’d met him just once before vacation, a quick coffee one morning to let him know about our upcoming vacation. His response? “You’re drawn to the water, Alex. It’s what you need to recharge your batteries. Go and enjoy yourself with your family. And know when you get back, I’ll be waiting for you.”

I hopped over a half-deflated float, circled three kids working on a castle that might have rivaled Downton Abbey, and then I picked up the pace. I could see our rainbow-colored umbrella in the distance, and I wanted to redline my pulse in a natural way. Well, in a natural way that involved one person.

Ezzy was right. While I couldn’t wait to feel the salty breeze in my face, I had used this vacation as an excuse to run from Brad, even though I wanted him—badly. But that was part of it. I wanted him too much, it seemed. And was it fair of me to pounce on him just because I hadn’t been laid in eons? On top of that, I used to think of Brad as a little brother. He had just turned twenty-eight—my oldest child was only thirteen years his junior. If I actually dove into a relationship with Brad, I’d be the biggest cougar out there at the age of thirty-nine.

But dammit, when he gripped my shoulders, then wrapped me in his arms and pressed his lips to mine, he was all man. Nothing immature or kid-like about him. He was serious, yet gentle. The sizzle was palpable, but I also felt more deeply connected to him in a way I couldn’t recall with Mark. Brad actually seemed more mature, maybe because he came across as approachable, so open with his thoughts and feelings. It just added to his sex appeal.

A week in Padre is just what the doctor ordered.

“Hey, Mom.”

I’d just reached the finish line of my run. Raising both arms over my head, I kept walking as I panted from the extra push I’d made at the end. I knew I had heard Luke’s voice, but I didn’t see him right away.

“Over here,” he said, peeking out from behind a hairy old man.

With his green Celtics cap flipped backward on his head, Luke returned his attention to the big man.

I sidled up to the pair.

"And while there have been plenty of rumors, no one has ever found the money," the man said.

"Wow, holy sh—"

"Hey now," I said while still catching my breath.

"I was going to say holy shoot."

I pinched his arm. "Yeah, right."

"Ooh, gross, Mom." He started giggling. "You're sweating like a pig. Are you okay?" His deep brown eyes seemed to be scanning my face.

"Just had a good workout, Luke. It feels great, by the way. Who's this?"

The man extended his hand and dipped his head slightly. "I'm Rex, although most people call me Captain Rex."

I gave him a quick handshake so he wouldn't be equally grossed out by my sweat, then sized him up a bit. His silver and white hair poked out from under his blue bucket hat, and his face was full of scruff. With a few soft creases in the right spots and reflective, gray eyes, he had a gentle nature about him, even if he was over six feet tall and north of two hundred fifty pounds. He wore a cut-off T-shirt with some faded logo on it. That silver hair also covered his arms and legs. *He must be straight from the baboon family, or is that what happens to a man when he gets really, really old?*

"Alex. Nice to meet you. And you know my little one here, Luke," I said.

"Yep, he's quite inquisitive." Rex released a Santa-like chuckle as he removed his hat and wiped his forehead. "He just saw me meandering down the beach and started asking me lots of questions, starting with why I was walking around with this." He held up a long, metal pole with a disc attached to the end.

"A metal detector. You must be looking for coins, maybe a lost treasure," I said with a laugh.

Rex smirked, but it was Luke who spoke up.

"How did you know, Mom? That's exactly what he's looking for."

Still panting a bit, it took a moment for Luke's words to resonate. I wiped a drop of sweat off my nose and shifted my eyes to Rex, who was obviously a crackpot, or at least enjoyed telling fables to kids.

Rex shrugged his shoulders. "It's true."

I tried to smile, thinking he would follow my lead and admit he was just playing a joke on us. Instead, he arched a bushy eyebrow and drew his peeling lips in a straight line. "I'm sure you're thinking I'm just an old coot with nothing better to do than rustle up a pot full of lies."

I almost cracked up at his use of the term "rustle up." Only in Texas.

"I'm sure you understand that I don't want Luke thinking he's going to stumble over a lost treasure, then kick back and coast through life without a worry in the world."

“Mom, it’s not—”

“Luke, I’m talking to Rex.”

“It’s Captain Rex,” Luke said.

I shifted my eyes in my son’s direction, then back to...Captain Rex.

“I don’t mean to create any family discord. I was just sharing with Luke why I’m out here. You can pay me no attention and go on with your lives.”

He tipped his cap and began to turn.

“Captain Rex, did I tell you my mom is an FBI agent? This Brinks robbery you told me about in Boston—that’s where we’re from.”

I wanted to put tape over Luke’s mouth. I’d told the kids in no uncertain terms that the details of my day job were not to be shared with just anyone they came across. But he did get my attention, even if he was citing a historical crime from the twentieth century.

Rex whirled around. “FBI, huh? You might be able to shed some light on all this, if you have the clearance to tell me.”

I gave him a wry grin. “It’s in the history books. Four guys robbed a Brinks armored truck in 1950. I think they stole about two and half million—”

“Two point seven,” Rex said. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“Two point seven million,” I repeated. “Most of it was never recovered, if I recall. And no, I’m not in the loop on every seventy-six-year-old cold case originating in Boston.”

“So I guess you’re not aware that one of the men involved in the robbery showed up in South Padre in 1959, nine years after the heist, and then lived here in peace for seven years before dying in a strange set of circumstances.”

Was this guy for real? “No, I wasn’t aware of that. But even if it’s true, you think he buried his portion of the cash under the sand?”

“I’ve spoken to lots of people. I’ve been working on a book, doing lots of research. He actually had about a million dollars, since he was the one who hatched the plan. And he didn’t bury the cash. Two other theories are out there: one being that he traded in his cash for gold bullion, and the other being that he swapped the cash for a large number of priceless coins. Either way, he purchased a metal chest that had a seal on it to keep the water out, about yay big.” He used his hairy hands to outline a box that might fit an oversized Vera Bradley beach bag.

While I was mildly intrigued with his theories and research, and given the right set of circumstances might be inclined to ask a few follow-up questions, it wasn’t right for Luke to be led to believe there was a realistic chance of finding anything other than pennies, bottle caps, or ankle bracelets.

I glanced down at a mound of sand and pushed through it with my running shoe. A memory from my past had just escaped from one of the few remaining dark spots left over from my amnesia: my high school boyfriend had actually given me an ankle bracelet for some type of special occasion. The night before I left for college, we buried it in the sand and said that if we were ever meant to be together, we’d meet up at that same location twenty

years later to the day and dig until we found it.

I scratched my chin and figured it had been almost twenty-one summers earlier. Then I caught a whiff of body odor and quickly realized it was me.

“We gotta run, Luke.” I rested my hand on his shoulder.

“But Mom, I want to partner with Captain Rex and try to find the lost treasure. This could be your ticket to freedom, to retire, enjoy the good life.”

I let out a snort before my hand reached my face, but his comment warmed my heart. My little man wanted to do something kind for his mom. “I can take care of myself, bud. But thank you for the consideration.”

“Think about it, Mom. A life with no stress. We could live on the beach forever!” He splayed his arms as if he were about to hug the ocean.

Damn, he was cracking me up, but I knew we had a better chance of winning the lottery than finding a chest full of gold or priceless coins. “Okay, mister, let’s...”

He took a step away from me and folded his arms. “Mom, you’ve got to be reasonable.”

“You listen to your momma, now.”

Lucky for Luke that Captain Rex spoke up before I gave my son an ultimatum he wouldn’t appreciate: zip it and fall in line or lose access to your phone for a day.

Captain Rex had Luke’s attention, so the old man ran with it. “I’m sure you’ll see me out here another day. I’ll keep you in the loop on what I find...if that’s okay with your momma.”

Two sets of eyes stared me down.

I conceded with, “If we happen to run into, uh, Captain Rex, he can talk to you about his treasure hunt.”

Luke and Rex gave each other high-fives, and then the captain flipped his metal detector back on and shuffled away while sticking in an earbud. I guess he couldn’t be too careful in his quest to find this mythical treasure that hadn’t turned up in eighty-odd years. Who was I kidding? Odds were the money had been spent long ago on cars, homes, and clothes. Hell, these days, that kind of money wouldn’t take long to burn through. I’d dropped over five hundred dollars alone just to get the kids updated swimsuits and beach attire.

“Hey, where’s your sister?” I asked Luke, flipping around to see the mats unoccupied under our small umbrella. I hadn’t seen her when I finished my jog, since all of my attention was focused on Luke and the hairy beast, Captain Rex.

“Over there,” he said, racing past me toward the water.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Luke, we need to get going. Where’s your sister?”

He had just tripped over the low tide and tumbled into the water. He came right up with a big smile on his face.

“Sister?” I yelled again.

He jabbed his finger to my left. I turned in that direction and initially saw

only a cluster of tents with various college logos etched on the tops. Older kids were gathered there, drinking, playing horseshoes, and listening to music. I took a few steps as I scanned the area. I only spotted scantily clad girls and guys with too much chest hair and heavy beards, most of who had a beer in their hands. I guesstimated these kids were at least juniors in college—definitely not Erin’s crowd. Luke had it all wrong. She must have taken a walk down the beach. I turned back to the water, and Luke was yelling at me.

“What?” I hollered.

“Right behind you!”

I slowly turned and found the back of a hunky college guy wearing some type of swimsuit that clung to his ass. His broad shoulders pitched forward, and I could hear laughter. That sounded like...Erin?

Shifting two steps to my right, I blinked twice to realize the ever-maturing body of my daughter matched the face. Just as I opened my mouth, Luke ran up.

“Now you see her?” he said.

“Oh yeah, I see her,” I said, stepping between Erin and the college predator.

“Mom, what are you doing?” she asked, a look of horror on her tanned face.

“Luke, run and get me one of our towels.” I stuck my hand out to the right, and he scurried away.

“Erin Giordano, what do you think you’re wearing?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. All I saw was skin wrapped in a few slivers of gold and black cloth. I tried to stay in front of her, but she moved away from me like I had the plague.

“Mom, this is the same swimsuit you bought me. I wore it here to the beach.”

I paused and did a double take. “But you had on a long T-shirt.”

“Hello, I still had on this same bikini under the T-shirt.”

I thought I had cooled down from my jog, but her “hello” comment sent a wave of heat up my neck.

“I guess I got you the wrong size,” I said just as Luke jogged up with a beach towel. “Here you go, wrap this around you.”

“Mother, you’re embarrassing me. The swimsuit fits fine.”

“Looks okay from here.” The college hunk spoke.

I flipped around ready to impose my will on the kid, but my eyes couldn’t help but catch a glimpse of the bulge in his...I just realized he was wearing tight boxer shorts.

“Do you mind putting on some shorts or a real swimsuit?” I gritted my teeth while staring straight into his hazel eyes.

“Sorry, ma’am, but I just got off work and all I have is that yellow, fish-smelling bib.” He pointed to a pile of clothes next to an open ice chest.

He must have seen my eyes shooting darts.

“I guess I could wrap a towel around me,” he said as his forehead crumpled like fried bacon.

He frantically searched for a towel for a few seconds, but didn’t have any luck, so he just grabbed the towel that was meant for Erin.

I turned back around to my daughter. “I must have gotten you a size too small.”

Erin shook her head. “You do know that everyone is staring at me.”

My peripheral vision could make out some staring eyes, and then I noticed she had a koozie in her hand. “Are you drinking beer? Jesus, Erin, you’re only fifteen, and here you are dressed like this, drinking beer.” I tried running my fingers through my hair, but the sweaty, sand-drenched knots snagged a fingernail. “Dammit,” I said.

“Mom, can we go now? I’m hungry,” Luke said.

Scowling at me, Erin pulled the can out of the koozie to show me an orange Izze. “Soda. That’s all it is. And by the way, his name is Corey, and we were just talking about what it would be like to major in marine biology. He goes to school at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi.”

I’d really stepped in it with Erin, but I couldn’t dwell on it just then. “Good for him. Say goodbye to your friends. We need to get to dinner with your grandfather.”

With that, I headed toward the umbrella to gather our things. I was a little nervous about the visit with Dad. I knew we’d either see him shit-faced or slinging so much shit it would be hard to tell when he might actually be telling the truth.

Dad slipped back into his chair and said, “Wow, they’ve even upgraded the bathrooms in this place. It’s been a while since we’ve been here, huh, baby?”

Baby?

I cringed, but I tried like hell not to show it. We were just wrapping up dinner at Mariano’s, a little Italian place in Port Isabel, my actual hometown, just across the one bridge connected to South Padre Island. Outside of the cutesy game Dad was playing with his latest squeeze, Carly, the dinner had gone much better than anticipated. He hadn’t ordered a single alcoholic beverage, and all things considered, he seemed reasonably healthy, lucid, and...uncomfortably frisky with this woman who was easily twenty years his junior. I wondered if she was older than I was.

“Hey, Donny, why don’t you tell Luke and Erin some of your sailor jokes?” Carly batted her fake eyelashes and squeezed his biceps. While she was surprisingly attractive and had all of her limbs, her smile was enough to bring shivers up my spine. She had more gold in her mouth than Flavor Flav.

“Hold on,” I said. As a former officer in the Coast Guard, Dad had a salty mouth, to say the least. I wasn’t keen on having the kids exposed to what I heard growing up.

“Mom, you’re such a buzzkill,” Erin said from the safety of the other side of the table. “Hello, do you know the kind of shit I see at school every day? Girls smoke weed in the bathroom, and there’s a massive cheating scandal that goes on between everyone ranked in the top ten percent of the class.”

Her “hello” attitude had carried over from the beach. To a degree, I couldn’t blame her. I replayed the whole scenario on the way back to where we were staying during the week, at my old friend Teresa’s house. Once I put myself in Erin’s shoes—or bikini, as the case may be—I kind of got where she was coming from. She couldn’t help that her body had changed. And she was only drinking an Izze. While that boy, Corey, was dressed more like a stripper than just a regular dude, he wasn’t smoking a joint or openly hitting on her—at least as far as I could tell. I knew I owed her a private mother-daughter discussion later.

“Okay, Dad, try to keep it PG or better, will you?”

He gave me a quick *I gotcha* wink. My breath caught in the back of my throat. That snapshot took me back twenty-something years, when his skin wasn’t wrinkled and he still had at least an occasional vibrancy for life, especially when he was coaching me on working out harder or giving me the thumbs-up before I’d play a big match. Then I’d usually go out and win in straight sets and he’d say to all of his buddies, “She’s my secret weapon, boys. Alex has that killer instinct that I’ve never seen before.”

It made me feel good when I was seventeen: stronger, confident, almost

invincible. Looking back, it was probably his way of overcompensating for me not having my mother around. Or he just had no clue how to raise a daughter.

“Okay, I’ll keep this clean for the little guy over here,” Dad said.

Luke’s brow furrowed. “I grew two inches in the last six months.”

“But you’re still a runt,” Erin said with a hearty laugh. She quickly stuck a straw in her sassy mouth, and I put my hand over Luke’s mouth before he could retort.

“Save us, Dad.”

“Why do seagulls fly over the sea?”

“I don’t know, Donny,” Carly said, splaying her hands while grinning at Luke. “Why do seagulls fly over the sea?”

Sheesh, they were a regular vaudeville act.

“Do you know, Luke?” I asked. He shook his head, then I glanced at Erin, who was too busy checking out the scene in the restaurant.

“Hit us, Dad.”

“Because if they flew over the bay, they would be *baygulls*. Get it?”

Carly led the laughing brigade, finishing every round with a snort, which cracked up both Luke and Erin. She had no clue they were laughing *at* her. She scratched her forearm, which brought my attention to her lightweight, long-sleeve shirt.

“Long sleeves, Carly? You must be one of those who gets cold instead of comfortable when these restaurants blast the AC,” I said.

She covered her breasts. “Don’t tell me my headlights are still showing. Shit, Donny, I even added a camisole on top of my regular bra.”

Classy. I tried to quickly change the subject. “Got another joke, Dad?”

“How much did the pirate pay for his piercings?”

Carly opened her hands and mouth, but I held up my hand, hoping to avoid the routine. Neither of the kids had a guess.

Dad said, “A buck an ear. Get it?”

The laughter was barely discernible.

After dessert, the waiter arrived with the check. I subtly asked him to hand it to me. But as he stretched his arm across the table, Dad snatched it from his hand.

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. I got this.”

He looked me straight in the eye. “No, Alex. You’ve been worrying about your papa for far too long. I’m doing well. Real well. I got this.”

I smiled and sat back, thinking about the last time I’d seen him in person. We were sitting in a diner in downtown DC. He had been fooled by a cold-blooded killer to share some of my personal background, and then she openly challenged me to find her and a hostage through some live streaming video site. I wasn’t sure about Dad’s health or his integrity a few months ago, but tonight he seemed like a new man. Gold grill and all, maybe Carly had been good for him.

I took a final sip of my iced tea and glanced over Erin's shoulder. I literally froze. I pinched the corners of my eyes, not believing what I was seeing. I recognized someone with whom I used to work. A man with a notable afro—what I called the Mike Brady fro. I told the family I'd meet them at the front door and walked to the corner of the restaurant.

"Archie Woods, I thought you'd still be stapling papers in DC. How are you doing?"

I'd been forced to co-lead a joint task force with my CIA counterpart. Archie and I worked side by side as we hunted a female serial killer down the East Coast. He was the most annoying person I'd ever encountered, but as it turned out, he wasn't a bad guy. Well, at least he'd stood up to his CIA bosses and essentially told them to shove their secretive, non-collaborative mode of operations up their collective asses. He was thrown off the task force. After that, we lost touch. Seeing him in Texas, in little Port Isabel, was surreal.

He calmly set down his napkin and in a louder than normal voice said, "I'm sorry, I don't recall you."

I held up a quick finger to his dinner mate, an anxious-looking guy.

Archie was always trying to one-up everyone around him. "Right, Archie. I'm surprised the agency let you out of the doghouse so soon," I said with a smile. I put a hand on my hip. I realized I didn't look that intimidating in my white blouse and blue and white skirt that fell just above the knees.

He briefly shifted his eyes to look just over my shoulder "I'm sorry, miss, but you must have the wrong person. Please don't harass me, or I'll have to get the manager."

Part of me was about to pop Archie in the shoulder with my fist, but I held back. Something was off. A second later, a man came around to my right and took a seat opposite of Archie at the table. He seemed a bit timid. He wore a frayed, red T-shirt and jeans with oil stains. Apparently, he'd been working all day, unlike the rest of us.

"Mom, let's go. I want to climb to the top of the lighthouse." Luke tugged me away, but it was obvious Archie was involved in a situation where he couldn't reveal his true identity.

A few minutes later, Luke and Erin were standing on the deck of the Port Isabel Lighthouse, seeing how far their voices would carry. Dad, Carly, and I huddled in the shade of the one live oak tree, just across the street from the restaurant.

"It's been fun, but we need to get going." Dad gave me a hug, and it felt good.

Carly offered me a fake kiss on the cheek.

"Let's get together again in the next day or two. Then again, I might be busy tomorrow." He and Carly headed toward a row of cars across the street, suddenly in a rush to leave, it seemed.

"Okay, Dad. I'll call you," I said with a wave.

He extended his arm, and I heard a beeping noise to unlock the doors of

a...shiny, late-model Cadillac Escalade? I almost shouted to ask if he had the right car. Was this the real Donald Troutt, my dad? The one who, since being forced out of the Coast Guard for drunken insubordination, had only worked a few odd jobs here and there? Earlier, over dinner, he had mentioned something about captaining a fishing excursion boat, which he said kept him busy and paid the bills. I figured that was electricity and groceries, not a six-hundred-dollar lease payment. Maybe Carly owned it, but I thought she only worked as a hairdresser.

With my excited kids' voices echoing over downtown Port Isabel about three hundred feet above me, the front door of the restaurant opened, drawing my eyes in that direction.

A moment later, shots ricocheted off buildings and broken glass sprayed like it was fired out of a water cannon.

The next few seconds came at me in slow motion. Orange flashes pumping distorted air from the main cross street, bodies lurching forward, blood splattering like mist from an ocean wave, and the piercing scream of my daughter. I spun around and looked up at the lighthouse, screaming at my kids to get inside and lie down.

The thundering boom of a pistol sounded from just outside the front door. It was Archie returning fire, even as bullets destroyed the outdoor lamp just above his head. Quickly shifting my eyes in the direction of Dad, my heart exploded—I could see the shoulders of a man sprawled out on the concrete on the other side of the Cadillac, a trail of burgundy draining from the body.

I had no gun, but I didn't care. I dropped my purse and ran like hell toward the row of parked cars. Almost immediately, a bullet took a chunk out of the concrete, blowing fragments in my face. I held up an arm but kept running, scanning the many parked cars along the street. And then I saw the shooters, their faces covered with black and gold bandanas. They were using a fatigue-green, older-model car for cover. One was firing a semi-automatic rifle, his shoulder trembling from the kickback. The other man was switching out his magazine. Then two more loud booms from Archie's weapon, and the second shooter took a bullet to the side of his head. His screams distracted his partner, who briefly looked away from his semi-automatic.

I made it to the row of parked cars, pausing for a second behind a red pickup. A single breath, then I darted out of my stance. The automatic weapons pumped more bullets through the air. I hunkered lower to the ground and turned my head to ensure the kids were still inside the lighthouse. All good on that front.

As I made my way down the row of cars, I could just make out the top of the Escalade, but couldn't see Dad or Carly. All the windows had been blown out. I could feel a wave of emotion starting to creep into my eyes, wondering if I'd lost my dad in another crazy death, just as I'd lost my mom to a drunken driver when her car was slammed off a bridge.

"No..." I said, pleading with some higher power not to take another

family member from me. Two more steps and I found blood at my feet, seeping through the pebbled concrete like molten lava. I dashed around a small SUV to the near side of the Escalade. Glass was everywhere.

“Dad!” I called out, hoping I’d hear his voice from the other side.

A flurry of bullets zipped overhead, then another boom from the sidewalk. Archie was still with us.

Now up on my toes, I scampered around the vehicle. I first saw the sandals and skinny, hairy legs, and my heart dropped. Then I lifted my eyes. There was Dad on one knee, holding a man’s head in his hands. Three lines of blood snaked across Dad’s face, but I couldn’t find the origin of his injury. Carly was hunched over like a turtle, covering her head, shaking, and screaming something indecipherable.

“Dad,” I said, running up next to him, Shards of glass sprayed everywhere when I skidded to a stop.

“He took a bullet to the back of the head. I’m trying to stop the bleeding, but it’s not working. He’s bleeding out.”

Just then, a man came around the edge of the Escalade. He had no bandana covering his face, and I could see his thin mustache. He smiled as he lifted his gun. Was he aiming at Carly? He muttered something I couldn’t understand in quick Spanish.

“Look out!” I jumped over Dad and landed with a thud on top of Carly, who screamed again.

A second later, the boom of Archie’s pistol rang in my ear. I glanced up and saw the same man clutching his shoulder, pain etched all over his sweaty face. He’d fallen back a couple of steps. Then I saw his gun on the ground. Our eyes locked for a brief second. Without thinking, I pushed off Carly and lunged for the gun. As I was in midair, I heard more shots, then a man shouting instructions.

Fully laid out on the concrete, I grabbed the pistol by the barrel and swung it around to the grip. I looked up, but the man had disappeared. A second later, I heard tires squealing. I jumped to my feet and lunged forward, making a beeline for the action. At the same time, Archie ran up from the right, both of us meeting at the corner of the sidewalk as the car drove off.

With both hands on his gigantic pistol, he pressed his lips together, swung his left foot around, and took aim.

“Hold it, Archie!” I dropped my hand on his arm before he fired. “People in the median,” I said, nudging my chin in that direction.

“Dammit!” he said through clenched teeth. He pointed his pistol upward, resting it on his shoulder. “I injured two, but they all got away. Fuck.”

Sirens split the air. We glanced at each other, then rushed to help with the many victims.

A medic wearing blue rubber gloves blotted disinfectant on Dad's ear in the back of the ambulance. The edge of Dad's lips turned upward, but his expression remained blank. Or did I actually see a hint of defiance? It reminded me of when he was younger, stronger, and hard-nosed. Before Mom died.

His eyes found mine. "Where are Luke and Erin?"

"They're trying to help any of the wounded reach their family or friends via cell phone. Erin knows just enough Spanish to be dangerous," I said with a forced chuckle. I cupped a hand to block the blaring sun and spotted both of them at the far end of the square. They were speaking with a couple in their twenties, who were both being treated for arm wounds. Immediately following the shootout, the kids flew out of the base of the lighthouse and ran over to me, covering me with hugs. Then they both said they wanted to help... needed to help in some way. I understood their desire.

High heels clipped the crunchy concrete off to my right, and I found Carly pacing on the other side of the ambulance, a phone attached to one ear, her other hand planted at her temple. Droplets of blood coated her yellow top. I even saw some on her neck and chin. She occasionally raised her voice in what appeared to be an animated discussion.

"Carly?" Dad said. He had tracked my eyes, likely hearing his girlfriend.

"Uh, yeah. She seems upset, or more pissed off, I guess."

"Eh," he said, looking away.

"Please look straight ahead, sir. One more piece of glass," the male medic said.

Scanning the area again, Erin and Luke were still talking to the couple, flanked by a cop and two medics. The entire area had been cordoned off by yellow police tape. I'd given my initial statement to the local cops already, but Archie was still in the process. Encircled by police detectives, border patrol, and DEA, he was flapping his jaws without taking a breath.

While the severity of the shootout was enough to keep the information flowing for a good while, Archie had always been that guy who could draw a crowd—and not always for the most flattering reasons. I still had no clue what he was doing in Port Isabel and why he denied knowing me earlier.

I'd quiz him later, after authorities undoubtedly asked us more questions.

"You know this is shit, and I'm not going to play this game," I heard Carly say. Then she walked away from the ambulance. When she reached the tree by the lighthouse, she flipped around and saw me watching her. It felt awkward, so I turned back to Dad.

"You're really quite lucky, you know," I said to him.

"I guess so. I wish I could have done something to help that fella who got

shot right in front of me. Took it in the back of the head.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I haven’t been in the middle of that kind of shootout since I was stationed off Miami Beach and we had a run-in with two small boats carrying Cuban soldiers. What was the final victim count?”

“Three dead, twelve wounded.”

I could hear Carly’s voice flare up briefly. Dad must have heard her too.

He inhaled slowly then let out a long breath. “I’m thankful nothing happened to Carly.”

I first gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Dad, how long have you known her?”

“Is this my daughter asking or the FBI special agent?”

The medic paused, his hand holding a bloody cotton ball, and he shifted his eyes to me. “What is said here, stays here,” I said to him. He nodded.

I looked back to Dad. “It’s your daughter, who doesn’t want to see you shacking up with someone just because she’s cute and strokes your ego. And besides that, I’m on vacation. I didn’t even bring my gun with me.”

“Maybe that’s a decision you regret right about now,” he stated.

While there was a degree of truth to his presumption, I didn’t like him insinuating that I could have reduced the casualty count. I gritted my teeth.

“Look, Carly is a solid person. She’s lived on this earth forty-one years, and she’s made her share of mistakes, just like the rest of us. But she’s compassionate, sees the best in people. Sees the best in me.”

The lines around his eyes became more pronounced. It was obvious he cared about Carly, was protective of her, which wasn’t a bad sign, as long as she was being honest with him. The interrogator in me still wanted to ping him with more questions, but I knew he needed a break. A hailstorm of bullets had just pummeled my little hometown. Everyone’s nerves would be frayed.

“I’m happy for you, Dad. Just take care of yourself.”

“I’m stronger than ever, Alex.” He flexed his biceps and tapped it with his hand. The medic pulled away and said, “I almost gouged your skull. You might want to be still, sir.”

Dad ignored him.

“I’m glad you feel good. It beats the alternative.”

“I’ll stay healthy as long as our local law enforcement will actually do something about the neighborhood gangs.”

I didn’t want to debate theories with Dad. When sober and lucid, his opinions were...strong and unfiltered.

“I didn’t know gangs had been much of an issue, at least not here. Maybe in Brownsville or up north in Houston,” I said.

“Random gang drive-by shooting is how it will be played to the media.” The comment came from Archie, who had just sauntered up.

“Son, I suppose I owe you a huge ‘thank you’ for saving our lives.” Dad reached out and shook Archie’s hand.

Archie turned to me and quietly said, “Son.” Then he winked and turned

back to Dad.

"I guess Alex here has told you all about our exploits," Archie said.

"Actually, no, she hasn't. Alex, anything to share?"

"Later, Dad."

Erin and Luke jogged up to the ambulance, and I asked them to keep Grampy company while I took Archie to the side.

"You said they're going to play this off to the media like it's a random drive-by shooting. What's the real scoop?"

"Local cops couldn't find their asses with both hands, but hey, they have limited resources. From what I've heard, they're more used to dealing with breaking up wet T-shirt contests during spring break."

He smiled and rocked his head at the same time. Then he popped both eyebrows and glanced at my chest.

"In your dreams, buddy."

"I didn't say anything."

"You never do. At least nothing worthwhile." I glanced over his shoulder and spotted three guys wearing DEA patches talking to a man and woman wearing Border Patrol caps. The local cop was nodding his head a lot.

"Well, if you won't tell me, then I guess I'll ask." I took a single step, but Archie grabbed my arm.

"Hold on, I'll tell you."

"You've got thirty seconds."

He turned and got so close I could feel his breath against my ear. I also picked up a strong waft of basil. I tried holding my breath while he spoke.

"DEA is worried about drug cartel violence spilling over from Mexico, at least this one region just south of the border, east of Matamoras. There's been a really bloody battle the last six months as groups vie for territory."

"So why pick the sleepy town of Port Isabel?"

"Lots of theories, but no direct evidence. Couple of them think it was nothing more than a show of power and reach. That one agent with the sideburns—he's taking the lead on the DEA side. He wants to make sure everyone is questioned thoroughly. He doesn't think they would take the chance unless they had a specific target in mind."

Twisting my torso, I scanned the crime area. Lots of first responders methodically went about their work. I tried to eye all of the civilians who hadn't been carted away in a body bag or to a hospital. Lots of regular-looking people—red, blue, and white South Padre Island T-shirts, flip-flops of various kinds, souvenir bags. I saw two boys wearing pirate hats and eye patches from a local restaurant. That instantly brought to mind a quick image of Captain Rex and his ludicrous idea of a lost bounty buried somewhere on the island. I shoved that thought to the junk-mail folder in the back of my mind.

"Not everyone wrapped up in the drug business looks like El Chapo," Archie said in my ear. I wrinkled my nose after picking up another strong

cloud of Italian food.

"You're kind of cute when you do that."

I turned my head, a look of revulsion on my face. "Excuse me?"

He shuffled back a step and held his arms up in a defensive posture.

"Wasn't expecting that kind of response."

"You can't say things like that to me, Archie. It crosses the line. And it creeps me out."

"Sorry, it's just that I've been learning a few things from the shrink I've been seeing. He says I need to be more transparent with what I'm feeling so that I don't let it all build up and then dump it on someone."

I gave him an encouraging pop on the shoulder. "Proud of you, Archie. Never thought you'd have the balls to take a look inward."

"Well, it was mandated by the CIA brass if I wanted to get my full pension and a letter of recommendation on my way out the door."

I rolled my eyes. "You still haven't told me why you're in Port Isabel."

"Working a case." He pulled a toothpick out of his front pocket and tossed it in his mouth.

"Working a case. That's all you have to say? I thought you were no longer employed by the CIA."

"I don't like to spread those rumors. Kind of helps the fear factor of those around me if they think the CIA might come down on their asses."

"Ah. So, are you working as a contractor?"

"I got my PI license. Made about twenty grand my first month." He torqued his shoulders like he was a badass.

"Damn." I always wondered if flying solo was more my style. I hoped he wasn't about to ask me to join his little firm. The thought of working with Archie again was enough to keep me in the FBI until I was buried. "What case brings you here and to Mariano's?"

"College kid went missing. I was talking to a possible source. Sorry about dissing you back there. I didn't want to spook the guy off, thinking I was working with the FBI."

"Eh," I shrugged. "What do you mean by missing?"

"A couple of rich parents from Weston were about to blow their wads because their boy stopped charging on his Amex. He was on vacation down here and had been known to cross the border to have a little fun. They threw a hissy fit to anyone and everyone who would listen, but authorities aren't giving it much of a look. Since the kid is an adult, and there are no obvious signs of foul play, the cops aren't convinced a crime has been committed."

"What have you found?"

"Not much yet. Just flew in this morning. The last he was seen was a week ago. I need to talk to his friends, although his parents say he's been known to go off on his own. He might just be on some type of partying binge somewhere in Mexico, or even farther away, using some of Mom and Dad's cash that he socked away." He scratched his chin. "You know, maybe I can

get a trip to Rio out of this. That's where they invented the Brazilian wax, you know."

As was the norm, Archie had me speechless. Then I felt an arm around my waist. It was Luke.

"Mom, what's a Brazilian wax?"

A snorting laugh from his sister, who had walked up behind him. "Squirt, are you ever going to understand the ways of the world?"

"Erin, he doesn't need to know something that doesn't impact him. Not at age twelve."

Luke frowned. "That's age discrimination, Mom. What do you think I'm going to do with this information...use it to bake cookies? I just need to be able to talk the talk. You know what I'm saying?"

Archie cracked a smile and held out a fist for Luke, who bumped it.

"I know what you're saying. I'm Archie, by the way. Me and your mom work together."

"Used to work together. In a former life," I said with hands on my hips.

He smirked, then cupped his hand over his face, as if he was about to tell a secret to the kids. "We were co-leaders of a joint task force to stop a serial killer," he said in a hushed tone.

The kids' eyes darted between me and Archie, taking in our banter with keen interest.

I clapped my hands loudly a couple times and said, "Okay, enough. Erin, Luke, go tell Grampy and...what's-her-name goodbye."

"Cute kids," Archie said, his eyes moving toward the area where most of the evidence—bullet shells and blood—was marked. Just behind the scene, a young Latin woman with lustrous, black hair and a figure to die for dipped under the police tape and walked straight toward Archie. At first he looked around, then he pointed a finger at his chest, his eyebrows raised.

"I'm sorry, but have we met?" He cinched up his pants.

At the last second, she pulled a microphone from behind her back and a cameraman appeared from behind a van. He flipped a switch on the side of his black box, and a light blinded me.

"Are you the man who courageously risked his own life to fight off the shooters?" the woman asked while sticking a mic an inch from Archie's face.

He cleared his throat, and I casually took a step back, hoping to get out of the picture.

"Well, uh, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And who are you?"

"A reporter for Action News. How many shooters were there?"

"Three, I think. Plus a driver."

"Did you not fear for your life?"

"Well, I kind of do this for a living."

"What is your occupation?"

Archie shifted his eyes to me, then back to the TV reporter. "I worked for

the government. But now I have my own PI business.” He turned to look at the cameraman, then fiddled with his afro. “If anyone would like to use my services, you can arrange a free ten-minute intro conversation by going to my website—whiteshaft.com.”

The reporter giggled, then covered her mouth. Archie didn’t seem to notice. “But let’s be clear, I don’t do pro bono work. If you’ve got the bucks, I’m your man. Whatever it is.”

While his cheesy character was enough to make anyone laugh, his timing was way off. He was actually soliciting for his PI business at the scene of a gruesome crime.

“Can you tell us your name, sir?”

“I’d rather keep my name on the down-low, if you know what I mean,” he snickered.

“But you just gave us your website.”

He seemed puzzled by his own logic. “True. But I don’t need my name all over social media. If you’re a serious client, then go to whiteshaft.com.”

She nodded once, as her lips turned up the corners.

“Whiteshaft.com. You heard it here first, everyone,” she said, turning to face the camera. “We have a real American hero on our hands. He’s actually kind of modest...in his own peculiar way. I’m Cynthia Gomez for Action News.”

The spotlight went out, and her colleague dropped his camera to his side.

“That’s a wrap,” she said, handing him her mic.

I could see Archie’s eyes drop to the cleavage peeking from her blouse.

“A real American hero,” I muttered under my breath.

A corner street light popped on and started buzzing. It was late, time to take the crew back to Teresa’s house. I scooted around Archie as he started wooing Cynthia. I could see Luke and Erin hugging Dad. I raised my hand to signal to the kids it was time to head out when someone tapped my shoulder.

“Miss Troutt?”

I turned to see a man an inch shorter than me. The DEA agent with sideburns and, now that I saw him up close, a scar that ran from one of his sideburns, across his cheek, and ending just under his eye.

He flashed his creds. I saw the name Raul Marta. “No need. My, uh... Archie told me you’re leading the investigation, at least for the DEA.”

“Good. He told me you’re FBI. I guess I should have called you Special Agent Troutt.”

“I’m on vacation. Call me Alex.”

“I know you gave your statement, but I was hoping for a minute of your time.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, and I want to be a team player and all, but I’m on vacation.”

“Understood,” he said with a forced grin while taking out a small notebook. “I know when I’m on vacation, my wife tells me to keep the work

stuff behind or I'm in trouble."

"I'm not married." I sounded defensive, although it wasn't my intent.

"I'll get right to it. During this horrific incident, did anything seem odd or stand out to you in any way?"

"Three people died."

His lips drew into a straight line. I'd released another defensive remark.

Come on, Alex. The guy's just doing his job.

"Sorry, I was stating the obvious."

"Look, I'm only asking because I know you're trained. And that you have experience in these types of confrontations. You probably saw things others didn't because they were panicking, just trying to stay alive."

I could hear Luke's excited voice in the background, and for the first time since the shootout, I let the possibilities of what could have happened crack through my outer shell.

"Those two over there..." I flipped a thumb over my shoulder and swallowed back a lump in my throat. "I could have lost them. So, trained FBI agent, experience in the field...that's all well and good. But I'm just like any other parent, I guess."

Clearing my throat, I took a couple of seconds and fought back tears, thinking what could have been.

"I've got three little rug rats of my own, ages seven, three, and nine months. I work crazy hours and have had to interact with a few people who just can't be human. Some of the shit I've seen, it's..."

A gust of wind blew through his hair, but his eyes fixated on the ground, his mind obviously in a different place.

I let a few seconds pass. "If anyone could see my nightmares, they'd probably have me committed."

Raul nodded while returning his gaze to me. "Amen to that. I think it's safe to say we could keep a shrink on a full-time retainer."

My kids, Ezzy...they were my therapy, my reason to live. A workout every once in a while certainly didn't hurt my emotional and mental stability either.

I brought a hand to my temple and narrowed my eyes, trying to pull my thoughts together. "The whole shootout took place in probably two minutes or so."

"That matches what others have said. What else comes to mind?"

"Gold and black bandanas. That's what they used to cover their faces, hide their identities."

An image of the third shooter rounding the car pinged my mind. "The third shooter, he didn't wear a bandana. Did Archie tell you about him?"

"Yes, but he didn't get a great look. He did say that he shot him in the shoulder. He was mighty proud of that shot."

"Saved our lives," I said, thinking how strange it was to associate those words with Archie the jughead.

Raul responded, but I didn't really hear him. I was replaying those few seconds when I thought the shooter had us. The shooter had shifted his sights and his pistol toward Carly. At least that was the way I recalled it playing out. It all happened so fast that the exact sequence was getting jumbled in my brain. Maybe the shooter had focused on Carly just because she was curled up in a ball, an easy target.

I shifted my eyes to Raul, but kept my lips shut.

"You're thinking something. What?" he asked.

I wasn't ready to throw out any theories on Carly being a target. That would lead to an endless series of questions centered around *why*. What if I had misread the shooter's actions? The DEA would scrutinize her, pick apart her life to no end. And Dad too. They seemed happy and didn't deserve to go through that kind of hell.

A siren came to life as an ambulance motored away from the scene. Another image popped into my mind, and I snapped my fingers. "Just before that thug took one in the shoulder from Archie, I recall seeing the expression on his face. He—"

"Had no soul. A ruthless, gutless piece of shit."

"That goes without saying. But there was something messed up with his face." I looked down, trying to conjure up the memory. I could smell Italian food, blood, and a strong burning odor in the air, and then I locked in on the shooter's face. It was skewed...off-kilter somehow.

"I'm almost certain I have this right. The shooter had part of his right eyebrow missing. It was shaved maybe in two places."

Raul scratched his chin. "Hmm. A couple of weeks back, we captured a suspect who was caught selling five kilos of coke out of his backpack. He was young and scared...so scared he started talking."

"Did the suspect have a screwy eyebrow?"

Raul held up a finger. "Hold that thought. Anyway, he told us there was a new gang of drug traffickers on the verge of becoming real players."

"Kind of like a new cartel?" I asked.

"The word 'cartel' is really used more by the media or for propaganda, to scare people into turning a blind eye, or to scare off a rival. But here's the crazy thing—"

A howling Archie interrupted Raul, and we turned our heads. "You want me to show you my big gun?" Archie said to Cynthia, who giggled like a schoolgirl.

I covered my eyes with embarrassment. He was the ultimate black sheep of law enforcement, even if he was officially part of the private sector now. "Please try to ignore him, and the fact that I even know the guy," I said to Raul.

Why did I feel like I had to own Archie's obnoxious behavior? Of course, guilt by association. I didn't want anyone thinking I was like him in any shape or form.

“You were saying...” I motioned with my arm to get Raul’s attention back to me.

“Right. Our suspect said the leaders of this group told him if he wanted greater responsibility and respect, he’d have to have the balls to lead a dangerous task. And if successful, he’d earn ‘stripes.’”

“What kind of stripes?”

“Shaved notches in the eyebrows. They represent stripes on a uniform, and it gives them a similar authority or rank over everyone else.”

“Damn,” was all I could say.

“A few minutes later, his attorney walked in the room, and he clammed up.”

“He might know the name of these drive-by shooters, or at least who they might be working for, who their target might have been. Or maybe they were just making a statement to their rival cartels. We need to understand their motivations and this guy sounds like he might have the answer.”

“You just said ‘we,’” he said as a set of white teeth split his face. “I wouldn’t mind the help, especially from someone with as much cred as you’ve got.”

I raised both hands in front of me. “It was simply a figure of speech. What do you mean by cred?”

“I saw the video a few months back. That psycho bitch challenged you to find her and the senator before she killed him.”

The back of my tongue got a quick taste of dinner. Talking about the past, especially when it involved a serial killer and my family, wasn’t on my list of objectives. “Eh,” was my seriously lackluster response. I added, “Look, I’ve got to get going. Get the kids back, try to figure out a way to forget about this shooting and enjoy our beach vacation.”

“I’m sure the guys have your phone number, but would you mind giving it to me in case I have more questions?”

“I’m cool with that...just don’t bring up past videos.” I gave him my number, and he texted me to make sure it went through.

“Good luck with your investigation, Raul. And stay safe.”

Before I had a chance to turn my head, Erin had gripped my arm with both hands.

“Mother, we’ve got to get out of here,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Are you feeling okay, Erin?”

“I just got my monthly visit from you-know-who.”

Oh joy, I thought to myself. She was typically a vision of loveliness during those times. “It will be okay, Erin.”

A second later, Luke popped his head under my arm. I looked up and didn’t see Dad or Carly.

“Where’s your grandfather and his friend?”

“Oh, they left. Took Uber back to their place.”

“What about their car?”

“Said insurance would take care of it,” Luke said, wrapping his arm around my waist as we walked away from Raul. Erin was a few steps in front of us, her arms wrapped tightly across her chest.

Luke looked up at me. “By the way, Mom, can I invite a friend to vacation also?”

I gave him a confused look. “We’re already here, dear. This is our family vacation. We’re here to bond, explore, have fun. Why would you ask that?”

“But Erin just said she’s having a visitor fly in.”

Erin planted a foot and jerked her head around. “Are you that clueless, runt? I’m having my—”

“Zip it, Erin. TMI.”

We couldn’t get back to Teresa’s house fast enough. I spotted my dusty, red Camry on the other side of the square, and we headed in that direction. After the kids fought over who would get the front seat, I pulled up to an officer so he could let us through the crime scene. He moved the tape and waved us through.

“Thank you,” I said through my open window as my car inched forward, the TV station van parked to our left. The back door opened, and Archie and Cynthia crawled out.

“You know, some people back in Boston call me Dirty Archie, just because of that, uh, big gun I’ve got,” Archie said with a snicker before he saw me.

I quickly punched the button on the window, but it was too late. He jumped two steps and landed both hands on the hood.

“Hold on a sec before you go,” he said, moving over to my window that was now only slightly cracked open.

“We’re tired and need to decompress. Sorry.” Feeling a headache coming on, I put my finger back on the button.

“Alex, hold on. I need help on my case. Can’t you stick around so we can brainstorm a bit, you know, like the old days?”

“Not now. We need a break.” I punched the button to fully close the window, then I heard a shrill.

“My fingers!” Archie yelled.

I rolled the window back down. “You shouldn’t have them in there. Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to hold that big gun of mine.”

Cynthia slinked up next to Archie and ran her hand across his chest. “I’ll hold it for you, Archie.”

He smiled.

I huffed out a breath, then punched the gas. I could hear him yelling, and I looked in the side mirror.

“I’ll call you,” he said, holding his fingers like a phone up to his ear.

That’s one call I’ll be sending straight to voice mail, I thought, as we finally cleared the scene and drove to Teresa’s house.

Soft lighting illuminated the outline of the lush backyard, with red and pink oleander and palm trees accented by mounds of white and yellow flowers. But after a quick scan, my eyes couldn't help but gravitate to the sparkling, aqua pool.

"Damn, you've got the life, Teresa," I said, kicking back in one of her two outdoor chaise lounges.

I took a sip of white wine, then let my feet scoot across the suede pillow Teresa had brought from inside. It felt divine. After getting the kids to calm down—and that took some work with Erin's little visitor and associated mood swings—my old high school friend grabbed her best bottle of chardonnay and ushered me to the oasis. Music piped through hidden speakers, and the rushing sounds of a waterfall at the far end of the pool made it seem like we were on an island.

"You need a refill," she said as the bottle clinked against my glass.

"Can't argue that," I said, bringing the wine to my lips a second later.

"I'm just glad you and the kids and your dad are okay. We're not used to violence like that down here by the coast," she said. After putting the wine in a cooler, she sat down with her own glass in hand.

"When bullets are flying like that, no one is safe within two hundred yards. We're damn lucky."

She leaned toward me and held up her glass. "Here's to a little luck."

I clinked the glass and let the wine soothe my throat on the way down. In the background, I could hear the gravelly voice of Bryan Adams belting out "Cuts Like a Knife."

"Wow, that one brings back some memories," I said, swiveling my head to look at Teresa. Even at almost midnight in a pair of old shorts and a tank top, she looked like a million bucks. She'd always had that natural beauty. A few lines here and there, but her curvaceous figure looked almost the same as it did twenty-plus years ago. She didn't have on an inch of makeup and could still cause any guy between the ages of twenty-one and eighty-one to look twice if she walked by.

"Oh yes, I can remember a rendezvous we had with a couple of boys to go see Bryan Adams in concert." She was staring at the stars with a smile etched on her face.

"You've always had quite the memory, Teresa. I vaguely recall that night, and I couldn't even tell you the boys' names."

"Charlie and Juan," she said.

"Oh, I know why I don't remember. They both had their eyes glued to your chest. Remember, I was the tomboy with an underdeveloped body."

"Eh, I'm not sure about that."

“About what, your body turning heads?”

“Are you kidding me? There wasn’t a girl in the Rio Grande Valley who didn’t want what Alex Troutt had. You didn’t have an ounce of fat on you, you were athletic as hell, smart as a whip, and you had swagger. You weren’t afraid of anyone, and if they fucked with you...well, look out.”

I just laughed.

“You don’t recall that time we played on the same soccer team in the eighth grade, do you?”

I felt a gentle breeze wash over my face. I had finally relaxed. “We played soccer, but what of it?”

“We had just played a district game where we won, 6-1. I think you scored four goals.”

“A regular elephant, you are,” I said.

She held up a finger to signal there was more to the story. “Anyway, after the game, we all walked to the center of the field for the customary handshake. Some chick on the other team—the Lady Farmers I think was the team—she went off and called me a dirty little spic. You stopped in your tracks, whipped her around, grabbed a fistful of her shirt, and lifted her three inches off the ground. I remember the muscles in your arm. That girl about peed her shorts. You made her apologize right there in front of everyone.”

“I guess I remember that. She needed to learn a lesson. She was a smarmy little bitch.”

She traded fist bumps. “You had my back, Alex.”

We clinked our glasses again and giggled until we both took another swallow.

“Hey, didn’t you go to prom with Mario? You guys were a cute couple back in the day,” Teresa said.

I thought about the pact Mario and I had made on the beach so many years earlier. It was silly, but at age eighteen, it had meaning. I felt a little guilty for losing touch with him. He was a good guy—at least he was two decades ago. He could be in prison by now, for all I knew.

“I can see you’re going down memory lane, thinking about what could have happened differently.”

“You can really read people, Teresa. I guess that’s how you’ve built your realtor business.”

She turned and crinkled her nose. “I wasn’t very good at reading the first guy to sweep me off my feet.”

She was talking about Dave Frazier. She was a junior while he was two years into college when they started dating. To me, it was pretty obvious what he wanted from day one, not just from Teresa, but from every other pretty girl who crossed his sights. We called him Suave (with a long “a” sound) Dave. He once even tried to make one of his slick moves on me when we were partying on the beach late one Friday night. The asshole didn’t have a chance. I twisted his arm around and up his back so far I might have separated his

shoulder. I never told Teresa. She didn't want to hear about his exploits; she enjoyed la-la land. That all changed a couple of years later, just after she graduated high school. She got pregnant.

Teresa and Suave Dave stayed together four or five years, then he said he'd yet to live the adventures he'd envisioned, so he took off and never came back. She raised her son by herself.

Big mistake for old Dave. Teresa dropped out of school but went on to get her realtor's license and started learning the business. It appeared she'd worked her ass off to develop a nice little empire.

I heard the swoosh of the sliding glass door, and I lurched, spilling my wine all over my shirt as I scrambled to an upright position.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Hey, Mom." A young man walked in between us until he was standing in front of the pool.

My eyes did a double take.

"Oh, hey, it's you," the guy said.

"Corey, right?" I said to him, then I turned to Teresa. "I thought your son was off at college."

He answered before his mom could. "I was. I just came home for the summer to earn some extra money." He smiled and scratched his heavy beard.

"You two know each other?" Teresa used her wineglass to do her pointing.

"Erin was hanging out with Corey and his friends today on the beach." I could feel my gut tighten into a nice little knot. Erin was obviously ready to take a couple of giant leaps in the freedom department, but she sure as hell wasn't ready for college kids. I thought I'd been able to thwart that advancement earlier, and now she was going to be sleeping in the same house with the dreamy guy from the beach who had shared far too much of himself.

Right now, though, he was wearing a regular bathing suit. *Wonder where that was earlier.*

"Corey's a marine biology major at Texas A&M in Corpus Christi. Smart kid, he is. But that's so cool you ran into each other. Small world, huh?" Teresa said.

Corey couldn't stop with the smirking. "Yeah, Mom. Who would have thought I'd run into your old high school friend on the beach with her kids?"

Something about Corey made me worry. Was it the twinkle in his blue eyes that matched the color of the sparkling pool? Maybe it was his powerful physique, the well-developed chest and shoulders—he apparently had yet to find a shirt to put on. He certainly had the goods to woo a woman, or a girl, as was the case with my fifteen-year-old.

"Did you guys hear about the shooting over by the lighthouse?" he asked. "Crazy shit going on. Wonder if the drug cartels are going to take their turf wars to this area?"

"I texted you four times," Teresa said, holding up four fingers for emphasis. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. Whatever happened to you

responding back to my texts?"

"Sorry, just kind of wrapped up in stuff."

Teresa repositioned herself on the chair. "Ah, to be twenty-one and free as a bird with no responsibilities."

He ran his hand across his flat belly. Did he just wink at me...in front of his own mother, my dear friend? Damn, this guy really thought he was a modern-day Casanova. I was about to jump up and give him a piece of my mind, but I held back, and took a deep breath instead. I didn't have to act like an old crotchety lady...yet.

"You got anything to eat, Mom?"

Teresa giggled. "You're a bottomless pit, Corey, and yet you look like a swimsuit model. You might be ripped, but I'll always remember your chubby cheeks when you were just a toddler."

He chuckled once, then raised both eyebrows. "Food?"

"I'm not your short-order cook," she said with a giggle. "What are you hungry for?"

"Maybe some roasted marshmallows."

Teresa giggled, and I tried to smile, still not buying what Corey was selling. "At least that's better than bologna and hot sauce," she said.

The door swooshed open behind me again.

"No one invited me to the party," Erin said, sauntering by me. She only had on a long T-shirt, and I rose to my feet. Before I could say a word, she lifted the back end of her T-shirt to show a pair of pink shorts with "South" etched on one cheek and "Padre" on the other.

"It's because it's late. You should be in bed, Erin," I said, trying to prevent further interaction between my daughter and the son of Suave Dave.

"Oh, Alex, relax. It's vacation, and Erin is growing up. We should roast some marshmallows over the fire pit. It will be fun." Waving her hands in the air as she spoke, Teresa grinned and headed to the kitchen.

Sigh.

I thought it would be hard to fall asleep with thoughts of the shootout still pinging my brain, wondering if Carly could have actually been a target or not. But now I had real issues to worry about, and I knew I wouldn't sleep a wink with Mr. Slick in the house.

A seagull squawked as it flew just above the awning and landed on the railing off to my right. Soaking wet, I walked up the wooden plank ramp next to a pier filled with jet skis and used both hands to push my crazy hair out of my face.

In no time flat, a man invaded my personal space, and I stopped in my tracks, halfway up the ramp.

“Hiya, Alex. Long time no see.” Archie’s smile couldn’t get any bigger.

“Jesus, Archie, you scared me.”

“I thought the FBI’s biggest badass doesn’t get scared.”

“Only of your ugly mug showing up on our family vacation for the second time in two days.”

“Ouch, you really know how to throw those zingers, Alex.” He turned to glance at the bayside water, and I followed his gaze. I think I might have hurt his feelings. Maybe he was more insecure about his looks than he let on.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to cut you down. I’m just playing with you.”

He shifted his eyes to mine, and then the corners of his mouth turned upward.

I held up a hand. “Don’t say what you’re thinking.”

“Hey, Mom,” Luke called out between the slats of the wooden railing above my head. “Can we get lunch here? I’m hungry as hell.”

“Don’t cuss, Luke. Yes, you and Erin can get a table and order us burgers.”

“Cool. Thanks. Hey, Erin...” Luke turned and ran off, his voice fading into the music, a Jimmy Buffet beach mainstay, “Margaritaville.”

Archie flicked a wrist at my life jacket that covered a good portion of my bathing suit. “You can take that thing off, you know.”

“I will after I dry off.” I noticed he also had on a life jacket, which was dark red from being soaked in the water. But something was off. His hair, while a little windblown, wasn’t wet at all.

“Did you just ride a jet ski or soak in a hot tub?”

“Jet ski all the way, babe. I just like to take it nice and easy.”

I nodded, but refused to acknowledge his innuendo.

“Right. Hey, I’m kind of hungry, so I’m going to have lunch with my kids.” I took a step up the incline.

“But I thought we were going to have our little de-brief on my missing college kid case?”

“I never said that.”

“Yeah, remember, I gave you the signal when you drove off last night?”

“I remember the signal, but I never agreed to anything.”

“I just thought, you know, we made a pretty good team when we were

hunting you-know-who down the East Coast.” He looked down and shuffled his feet.

Archie was the kind of guy who, at times, could look like a wounded puppy begging for a ‘thatta boy’ and a pat on the head. But I also knew that as soon as I turned to look the other way, the wounded puppy would be humping my leg.

“If you’re in the middle of this important case, then why are you taking the time to do the tourist thing and go jet skiing? You should be pounding the pavement, talking to people, like those friends of his.”

“Does that mean you’ll talk to me about the case? Maybe we can all have lunch together.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want the kids listening to all this crap. Are you lonely? I thought you and the reporter were getting friendly.”

“We were...are. Cynthia was actually supposed to join me and give me a water tour of the bay, but her news director sent her off to the hospital to follow up on those who were injured from the shootout. But, man, I was sure as hell looking forward to seeing her in a swimsuit.” He bit down on his knuckle. “Did you see the body on her? Hot damn.”

“Archie, I’m a woman. I’m not some ogre buddy of yours.”

“Right. So you’ll talk to me about this case while the kids eat lunch?”

“No, but I’ll give you two minutes standing right here.”

A trench formed between his eyes. “It takes me two minutes just to take a whiz in the ocean. That’s not enough time for us to brainstorm about this case.”

“A minute fifty-nine, fifty-eight.”

He held up both hands. “Okay, okay. Damn, you’re such a hard-ass.”

“One fifty-seven...”

He pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes slightly. “My jet ski excursion, it wasn’t about all fun and games. I was told by my source the other night that there’s this house where a lot of crazy shit goes on. I was trying to get a peek and hopefully take some pictures.”

“A party house. Why do you care about a party house?” I asked.

“Oh, I forgot to mention that part. That source from last night...he remembers seeing Kyle at that house a week ago.”

“Kyle...”

“Kyle Spencer. Age twenty-two, but apparently he’s only a sophomore by the number of college hours he’s completed.”

“Five-year plan?”

“Eh, more like seven or even eight years at his pace.”

“Where does he go to school? Or, rather, where is his party headquarters where he pretends to go to school?”

Archie winked and pretended to fire a pistol with his finger. “Good one. He attends the University of Virginia.”

“A Cavalier. That’s not an easy school to get into. Might be the toughest

state school in the country.”

“The real question is how he’s still enrolled. He’s been on academic probation for five straight semesters and during that time his GPA is under 1.0.”

“They go that low?”

“I once came through with a 0.7 average in a semester.”

“They didn’t forget one or two of your grades?”

“I wish they had. That might have gotten it above a 2.0.”

“I thought the CIA had a pretty rigorous standard in academics.”

“They do. My dad knew someone who knew someone else, and got my record expunged at Penn State. I then started over at Maryland. Because I graduated in four years—with honors, I might add—no one asked any questions about my time before then.”

A jet ski engine growled as it plowed through the water and scooted up the ramp nearby. I turned to watch a number of teens jumping off and high-fiving each other. One of the Parrot Rental employees jogged up the deck one level below us. “Hey, Mr. and Mrs., we need your vests back. Can you toss them down here?”

“He’s not my husband, believe me.”

“Sorry, I don’t know your names, Mom and Dad.”

I was pretty sure my eyes popped out of my head. “Kids with this guy?” I pointed at fro-man. “Are you fucking crazy?”

“Yo, chill, lady. It’s just a figure of speech.”

I could feel a flash of heat surge up my neck, and I bit the side of my cheek to restrain my response.

“I’ll show you mine if you will show me yours.” Archie had his hands on the clips of his life vest.

“You just creeped me out, Archie.”

“Come on, you two. We’ve got twenty people standing in line over there,” the teen said.

I heard a loud whistle over at the jet ski ramp. A guy with mirrored sunglasses and white sunblock on his nose yelled, “Time is money. Let’s move it.” He snapped his fingers. “Please, I don’t want to get fired. This is how I’m paying for tuition in the fall.”

I certainly didn’t want to halt the education of our children. I quickly unlatched the clips and tossed the vest over the railing. Archie did the same. I couldn’t help but look at Archie’s chest. He wasn’t in bad shape, but I quickly wondered if the cosmetologist had given him a two-for-one special on perms—his head and chest hair.

He whistled and rocked forward on his Tevas.

“Okay, this is awkward,” I said as a cool breeze brushed across my body just as a few clouds covered the sun. My one-piece bathing suit suddenly felt quite transparent.

“It shouldn’t be. We’ve been partners. Partners share everything, right?”

“Nick and I do.”

“Well, we were partners for a while.”

“True.”

“Good, because your headlights are showing.”

I balled up my fist and punched him right in the socket of his shoulder, then crossed my arms across my chest.

He winced and said with a pinched voice, “No one remembers seeing Kyle Spencer leaving the party house that night.”

I turned my head and peered into Archie’s eyes.

“That makes no sense.”

“My source was there almost the entire time.”

“Are you sure this source is reliable? Maybe he’s got a stake in the crazy shit that goes on there.”

“He was helping cater the food. He sees a lot of freaky shit, especially during spring break. But he’s also got a family. He seems legit, at least so far.”

I cupped my hand over my eyes and scanned the rooftops of the homes lining the bay. I couldn’t see everything from my vantage point, given that the location of the dock was inside a channel of water. Over the years, South Padre had gone through various growth spurts, including high-rises on the beach side and custom luxury homes on the bay side. The architecture of these custom homes was unique and pricey—in the millions. And their owners? Many were either a member of the Northern Mexico elite or Texas yuppies who had just hit it big in some type of financial bubble, whether it was real estate, an IT startup, or the oil and gas industry.

“Not sure you can see it from here, which is why I took the scenic route,” Archie said.

“Moving at supersonic speed,” I said with a wry grin.

“Like I said, I like to take things—”

“I know, nice and easy. You sure you’re just not afraid of going fast?”

“I drive my sports car like a madman.”

“True, you know how to handle yourself behind a wheel. I’ll give you that much.”

“A compliment from Special Agent Alex Troutt,” he said, clapping his hands three times.

I ignored his childish response and turned to find the kids sucking down soda at the outdoor table. I slowly walked up the ramp, thinking through what Archie had relayed. He was shoulder to shoulder with me.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“As usual, lots of questions. Hopefully, if you ask about a hundred, one of them sticks and you’ve got an actual lead.”

“I guess I’m stuck on what the top one hundred questions are.”

“For starters, you need information...on a lot of people.”

He bumped my shoulder as he rushed up the ramp to an outdoor bar and

asked to borrow a pen and paper. The lady gave him a napkin and a tiny pencil.

I paused next to Archie and waved at the kids. They seemed content. Luke's legs were swaying under the plastic chair. Erin had on her chic sunglasses, watching the bustling business around her and the sun-drenched water beyond. Most importantly, they weren't arguing with each other.

"Okay, hold on. This twig of a pencil is useless," Archie said, glaring at it, as if that would make it grow bigger.

"Here, try this," I said, grabbing a pen off the bar.

He tested it and broke a hole in the napkin after managing a few squiggles. "It works. Okay, you kick off the information we need."

"*You* need," I corrected him.

"Okay, you don't want to join forces with me yet," he said, grabbing a new napkin. "But you will. I'm a magnet. You won't be able to stay away."

"Want to bet on that?"

He dropped his pen to the napkin. "Fire away."

I began to wonder if Archie had truly led an investigation or had instead gotten used to being nothing more than a cog in the CIA machine. As a PI, he wouldn't survive without the ability to walk through the scenarios with minimal help. For now, I'd give him a boost, but in the long run, I knew he'd have to learn how to walk and run on his own.

"Ma'am, can I get you and your husband a drink?"

I planted both hands on my hips and stared at the bartender. "What is it with you people? I'm not married to this guy. Never was, never will be. Sheesh."

A waiter walked by and said, "If it's any consolation, I thought he was your brother."

I wasn't sure which was worse—Archie being a blood relative or a spouse. I felt my body quiver at either thought.

"Can we just get back to your investigation? And by the way, I do realize you've used up your two minutes."

He grinned like a kid who'd just fooled his teacher into extending recess.

I turned to the bartender. "By the way, I'll take a mango margarita. I'm on vacation, right?"

"Coming right up. Oh, salt or no salt?" The bartender tossed a coaster down.

"The works," I said. "Archie, you want anything?"

"Offering me a drink too? Must be my lucky day." He turned to the bartender. "I'll have the same fruity drink she's having."

I took in a breath of salty air and rested my forearms on the bar.

"Down to business here, Archie." His eyes drifted to some of the women walking around the place in bikinis. I snapped my fingers and pointed at the napkin. "Time on task," I said.

His pen touched the napkin. "Right. Hit me."

“You first need to verify the story of your source. Go talk to the manager or owner of the catering company.”

“What if they clam up?”

“Then you know not to trust the catering company in general. If they are a legitimate business, then they’ll most likely share everything they know.”

I could see him writing out some type of chicken scratch on the napkin.

“Have you talked to his buddies yet?”

“I have calls out to three guys, two here on the island and one going to summer school at UVA.”

“You’ve got to talk to his two buddies. How long has it been since you called them?”

“Late last night.”

“Okay, not sure if they’re avoiding you or just sleeping off a night of partying. Either way, they don’t seem too concerned about Kyle’s well-being. But hopefully you can find out today.”

“Got it.” He quickly snatched another napkin and jotted down another note.

“Shouldn’t you have some type of detective notebook, for chrissakes?”

Archie stopped writing and opened his mouth.

My deductive mind was in the zone, so I kept going. “Of course, you need to know more about the house. Who owns it? Are they the ones holding the parties? By the way, what did the source say he witnessed at the parties?”

Archie leaned in closer. “Lots of drugs, group sex, light shows, nude modeling. He wasn’t sure everyone was of age, or if they were there of their own free will.”

“And the local cops haven’t tried to shut it down?”

“Apparently not. Maybe some of the local authorities were guests.” He shrugged his shoulders.

The theory sounded so ludicrous that it could be true. “Good thinking, Archie.”

He froze, then flipped his head back to me with a wide smile. “The second compliment in the last couple of minutes. We’re bonding, Alex. I can feel it.”

I rolled my eyes and pretended I didn’t hear him. “I can talk to my friend, Teresa, and ask if she knows who owns the house or anything about them. She’s lived here her entire life and runs a realtor business. I have a feeling she’s looped into the right contacts to pick up the gossip trail.”

The bartender delivered our drinks, and I slurped in a mouthful of the frozen mango drink.

“Nice,” I said.

Archie did the same. “I think we have similar tastes in our drinks too.”

I wasn’t sure what he was trying to prove, but it seemed forced, whatever it was.

I nodded at the napkin covered in blue ink. “I think that will get you moving in the right direction. Then you just need to keep pedaling.”

“Wait.” His eyes went to the corner of the outdoor deck where a seagull had wrapped its talons around the railing. “What about Kyle’s parents, Thaddeus and Winifred?”

“Good point. Never rule anyone out until the evidence does it for you, even if they’re the ones who hired you.”

“Right. Thaddeus is a former UVA grad. He might have pulled some strings to get his son accepted to the school and continued lining pockets or calling in favors to keep his son from being kicked out.”

“Not that rigging grades or committing academic fraud has anything to do with Kyle’s disappearance or this party house where he was last seen. But you’re right, Archie. You can’t get enough information. It will give you context, if nothing else.”

“Three times in a day, Alex.”

“You’re actually counting?”

He opened his mouth, but I cut him off. “Don’t answer that.”

Scratching his head, he mumbled something while he held up his flimsy napkin. “I’m not sure I have enough time in the next month to track down all this information.”

He did have a point. I was used to calling in my support team, which, in addition to my partner Nick, included Gretchen and Brad. *Brad...hmmm*. It was difficult to think of him in a purely professional manner, although he was pretty fricking good at his job.

“Archie, I know you’re hinting at me to help you out. I just can’t. I’m on vacation with the kids.”

“But you will talk to your friend, Teresa?”

I nodded as I started padding away with my drink in tow. I held up two fingers to my ear, mimicking his gesture the night before, and said, “I’ll call you.”

Before I could swing my head back around, two, three pops cracked the air. I let go of my drink and ran to the kids. Glass crashed all around me and screams bounced off the side of the building. Out of the corner of my eye, people dropped to the floor. Two more steps and I lunged over the table, hooking an arm around each of the kids. We all tumbled to the floor. I heard Luke moaning as I strained to hear any other shots.

But those popping sounds didn’t really seem like gunshots, I realized. I lifted my head and peered through the slats of the railing.

“Incoming!”

“What the—?”

Archie landed with a thud right on my back.

“I got you, all three of you. You’re fully protected,” he said.

“Get off us, Archie,” I groaned, trying to wiggle my arms free.

A second later, Erin and Luke crawled out from under me, but Archie had yet to find his balance.

“What is wrong with you?” I said, unable to turn my head.

“I don’t think those were bullets,” he said.

“I know that. Pretty sure it was one of the jet skis backfiring. What is that poking me in the ass?”

“That’s why I can’t get up.”

My whole body went flush. I turned my neck as far as I could twist it around and gritted my teeth. “If you don’t get your pecker off me, I’m going to—”

“Kid alert,” he said.

He was right. I couldn’t say what I wanted in front of Luke and Erin. Instead, I wrangled my body to free a leg, then kicked backward with my calf.

“Oooh!”

Bull’s-eye. I pushed him away from me, then scrambled over to the railing.

“Sorry, everyone,” the Parrot Rental employee with the white nose called out to the startled crowd. “Just a backfiring jet ski. We need to clean the seaweed out of the engines.”

I let myself exhale, then glanced around the place. The popping noises had brought me back to the shootout and the unknown reason behind it.

The kids waltzed up, and Archie limped behind them.

“I knew it was the jet ski all along,” Erin said. “Holy shit, Mother, can’t everyone just chill and enjoy the island without freaking out over every little thing?”

I just stared at her, unsure what to say.

Archie made it to the railing. “That was completely unplanned back there you know.”

“I know,” I said, watching Luke talking to a parrot in a cage, seemingly unaffected by all the commotion. I bit into my cheek. “I need to make a call to the office. I want my team to look into a few things.”

“Like why those drive-by shooters seemed to be targeting your soon-to-be stepmom?”

I was shocked he’d noticed. “Carly is not going to be my stepmom. And yes, I need more information on her.”

“Cool,” he said. “Hey, while you’re on the horn with them, do you think you could ask them to do a couple of favors for my investigation about the missing kid?”

I knew Archie had an angle.

Chimes reverberated against the walls of his protective cocoon.

Kyle Spencer's first conscious breath sucked in a mouthful of dust—and something else. It was small, round, pliable. His gag reflex kicked in, and he spat the object into his hand. He could see nothing really, but he could guess.

A dead insect. No, a spider.

The spiders!

A lightning bolt of fear cracked the base of his skull and he nearly cried out. Pressing his lips together with everything he had, he somehow withstood the internal eruption, all of his appendages quivering uncontrollably for a few seconds. Tears coated his grimy face, but he zeroed in on the rhythmic thud inside his chest, doing anything within his power to calm his nerves, to control the only thing he could.

Opening his eyes again, he wedged his arms along the side of the box to reach his face, then wiped tears from his eyes. He tilted his head and attempted to see evidence of a tiny hole at the opposite end of the box. It took a good minute, but he was certain it was there. His only connection to the outside world. To oxygen.

Turning his head at a forty-five degree angle, he inhaled slowly with his lips just open at the edges, hoping to avoid more dust, and especially spider remnants.

Oh God. What the hell kind of crazy shit had he gotten himself into?

He recalled the feeling of furry legs prancing across his face, then down his shirt and across his chest. He had been immobilized by the sheer amount of cocaine he'd inhaled—some by his own choice, but most of it, at least nine or ten lines, with a gun to his head. A fucking gun to his head!

A perverted simulation of Russian roulette. Spin the chamber, pull the trigger. If it didn't fire, then he had to suck in another line of *llemlo*—their Spanish slang word for blow or coke.

They were some sick motherfuckers, and not just because of their twisted games or that one fucker's crazy fascination with tarantulas. These guys had no respect for anything, living or not. He'd been forced to watch as Tarantula Man beheaded a kitten. His comrades then joined him in a game of mini soccer, all laughing and grunting like the sick fuckers they were. Finally, Tarantula Man gave one last kick to the kitten's head, sending it flying into a row of empty liquor bottles, some of which toppled and shattered. He then raised his veiny forearms above his head and shouted until he had no more voice. It wasn't a scream of exuberance or happiness. It came from a dark place, where humanity didn't exist. The freak had been consumed with the thrill of the kill.

Another breath caught in his throat. He forced himself to swallow back a

potential cough. His tongue felt like worn sandpaper, and for a moment he allowed himself to visualize chugging a gallon of water, the liquid gushing all over his face.

Stop it, he told himself. He was just making it worse.

The chimes he'd heard earlier had gone silent. He had no clue where he was. His journey in the last week was as disorienting as it was mentally and physically agonizing.

It all started that night at the Party House. Actually, it had begun a couple of hours before that, when he and his buddies had smoked a ton of weed, then hit the island bars, pledging to each other to down three shots at each stop. At their second bar, they came out and saw the great tower—the bungee jump. And they knew they couldn't pass up the opportunity—the thrill of a lifetime on top of the high of a lifetime.

It didn't disappoint—so much so that his lifelong friend ever since the first grade actually barfed as he plunged downward.

He could recall everyone yelling, "Totally epic, man! Woo-hoo!"

But he couldn't leave well enough alone that night.

He had a reputation for being a guy who wasn't afraid to say anything to anyone, no matter the timing or the risks. He could easily see his mug shot as the first search result on Google for "Ass Hat." And he would be happy about it.

That night, after the bungee jump, they overheard three girls talking excitedly about a party. The guys were all in, but the girls wouldn't give up the location. They said too many important people would be there, and they didn't want to get in trouble.

So he and his buddies said they would personally sucker-punch every dipshit who walked past them until the girls gave it up—the location that is. They'd wait until the party to focus on the real turnover, where the poontang would likely be off the charts. It took four right hooks to four unsuspecting dudes before the girls got the message and finally relinquished the location of the party. They even decided to go as couples, just to make sure they'd get past security at the gate.

Once inside, he knew they had entered another world. He'd read stories about parties at the Playboy Mansion or in the side rooms at Studio 54 in New York City. This party put all those places to shame. It was sick...in the best possible way.

There were just as many drug stations as there were tables of food or alcohol. The place reeked of sweat and weed. They'd only been there a few minutes when a man in a black shirt offered each of them the biggest doobie they had ever seen. And to their amazement, he didn't even make them pay.

Nude women showed off their strength and flexibility around three stripper poles in one large room. Speakers as large as crates pumped out

nonstop music, everything from “Relax Don’t Do It” by Frankie Goes To Hollywood to Blue Oyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper.” The rhythmic thud was so deep and jarring that he couldn’t tell if it was coming from the inside or outside of his body.

Smoking the weed—some of the purest he’d ever inhaled—only brought out more of his brash personality. In almost every interaction with a guy or girl that night, he was full of braggadocio, on the verge of being confrontational. In other words, full of shit.

As the party wore on, he set his sights on one of the girls from the bungee jump—Norma. She had deep, brown eyes, long legs under a purple miniskirt, and a fair amount of cleavage peeking out from her white halter top. She’d been eyeing him ever since they met at the bungee jump, and she’d finally relaxed after a few puffs of her joint.

Just as he was about to make his patented move, Norma disappeared into another room. A few minutes later, she strutted out in nothing more than white boots and a thong bikini and headed straight for the stripper pole. As glittering lights bounced off her face, he could detect that her pretty eyes were painted with a dizzying glare. What had taken place in the back room?

Wrapping her legs around the pole, she seductively crawled up the pole, then slowly slid down while running her tongue along the edge. Guys were whooping and hollering like they’d never had a blow job. Maybe they hadn’t, but he wasn’t about to let his new girl live out the fantasies of a bunch of horny dudes. It just wasn’t right. Not in his world.

One middle-aged guy wearing a pinstripe suit was particularly interested in Norma. Was he one of those important suits the girls had spoken of earlier? The man with a round bald spot on the top of his head carved out his own space right in front of the pole and tossed money at her like it was a greenback ticker-tape parade. She was so out of it, she’d pick up a handful of bills and toss them into the air like she was playing in the leaves on a fall day in Virginia.

He leaned down and picked up a bill. Ben Franklin’s mug stared back at him—they were hundreds. While he’d been around money his whole life, and wasted plenty, he had never actually tossed it in the air. And he definitely didn’t like to share—his money or his girls.

He offered his hand to the girl, who probably was no more than nineteen. “Norma, let’s get out of here and go find a quiet place where we can be alone.”

She playfully bent over and spanked her bare ass, then flipped around and gave him a slow wink.

“She doesn’t want what you’re selling, so just go over to the corner and play whack-off with your frat-boy friends.” The suit lit a spliff, inhaled, and pumped donut-shaped smoke into the guy’s face. He then grabbed the girl by the hair, yanked her head down to his level, and kissed her.

She yelped and pulled away, her face suddenly void of its free-spirited

smile. “This here is my bitch,” the man said, then he chuckled and tossed more cash at her. One greenback stuck to her boob. “A Ben Franklin pasty! I’ll take that,” he said, jumping on the small stage and forcing her to bump and grind on his thigh.

That only drew more hollers from the growing throng of guys surrounding the mini stage.

Kyle, a former linebacker for his high school football team, took his mitt, clutched the man’s scrawny arm, and pulled with everything he had. It was like he’d just flicked a beach towel. The suit, at least forty years old, tumbled to the floor and started moaning.

“Hey, Norma. Fuck that bastard. Let’s get out of here.”

“But I like it here. I get to play in money,” she yelled as she tossed a handful into the air. She was so wasted she’d already forgotten about the suit treating her like a rag doll.

Kyle was no saint—to girls or guys—but he didn’t think this was very funny or cool. The girl didn’t have her faculties, and with all the testosterone in this party mansion, he knew it wouldn’t take long for her to be gang-raped. If he and Norma could hook up, he was still cool with it. But over the course of just a few minutes, as he watched sex-craved, gluttonous pigs poke and prod at girls who were younger and younger looking, he felt more uncomfortable with the whole setup.

He glanced around and saw dozens of trays with mounds of white powder. People of all ages and sexes crowded the tables where the trays were resting, taking turns using razor blades to create lines that looked like white snails. He’d snorted before and, as usual, had bragged about his sexual prowess. That was the only Kyle he knew, the one who couldn’t shut his fucking trap about anything. He was always right, always smarter, and certainly, the catch of a lifetime—if for no other reason than all the money at his disposal from dear old Mom and Dad.

But at that moment, none of it mattered all that much. At least not like it had as far back as he could recall.

He looked over his shoulder for his buddies, ready to give them the signal he was about ready to grab the girl and get the hell out of Dodge—he’d buy her some clothes, take her to Denny’s, feed her a late-night breakfast, and sober her up. No sign of Trent or Ryan. They must be off hound-dogging some other wenches. Not surprising, given their nightly ritual back at UVA and certainly when on vacation at a beach.

With no wingmen, he was only slightly apprehensive. No one person scared him, even though he’d spotted three or four bouncers with more veins on their foreheads and necks than Frankenstein’s monster. He could handle them.

Kyle quickly looked around for some type of cover. He spotted a navy blue beach towel with a dolphin on it. He took three long strides and pulled it out from under a man who was mugging down with some girl on a couch.

Who knew what the hell was on the towel, but he'd worry about it later, once he and Norma had safely removed themselves from the coke and sex orgy.

Just as he turned around, off to his left, one of the strippers took a swan dive off the couch and face-planted right on top of the tray. Smashing glass pierced through the thunderous music, turning everyone's attention in that direction. People walked like zombies, lurking closer to the train wreck, but no one actually got down on the ground to see if she was okay. She moved a little bit.

It was the perfect diversion.

Kyle moved quickly over to the stage. No one noticed him helping Norma down the two steps and then wrapping her in the dolphin towel.

"Where are we going?" she asked with a tiny voice.

"I'm going to get you out of here, get you some food and clothes. Just want to make sure you're safe." Hearing himself say those words was... surreal. He never been anyone's knight in shining armor, and never really thought of himself as having much integrity. He just lived to party. But tonight was different. Maybe he'd finally turned the corner and grown up a bit, just like his parents had been hoping—no, begging—for him to do for the last five or six years.

Moving quietly, the unlikely couple padded around the throng of rubbernecks...all staring at the train wreck. Then the girl on the ground pushed herself up slightly. Blood trickled off her forearms and onto the tile and shards of glass. And then she lifted her sweaty face.

It was coated with white powder.

Everyone laughed their asses off, which only aided the diversion.

Kyle made it through the main room with laughter still in the air. Through a crack in the crowd of people, he caught another quick glimpse of the girl on the floor. She was dazed and had started to lick her own face. He couldn't imagine how much coke she was ingesting.

Just then, Norma's legs gave out and her body became limp. Kyle dipped his shoulder and caught her before she hit the floor, which would have drawn attention. He wrapped one of her arms around his shoulder to get better leverage and hoisted her up. Her head swayed. She was wasted on coke and booze, and she seemed to be dipping in and out of consciousness.

"Just a little bit farther, Norma, and we'll be out of here."

"Thanks...what's your name again?" She snorted, blowing spit on his face. He wiped it clean. The old Kyle would have dropped her like a brick and just kept walking. But tonight was different. He felt sorry for her and the predicament she'd gotten herself into. He knew that if he left her there, her life would never be the same.

Taking one step into the foyer, he glanced over his shoulder for his buddies. They were still AWOL. They were big boys and fully capable of fending for themselves. They'd regroup back at the motel and swap war stories. He could already predict their response. "When did you become such

a pussy, Kyle?"

He turned and found a human wall two feet in front of him—a bouncer whose pecs would fit into a D-cup bra. His eyebrow twitched. "Where you going with her?"

"To get some fresh air. She's out of it."

"She's not leaving. You can leave if you want. I don't really know who you are anyway. But she stays."

"Sorry, but she's leaving with me. Now get the fuck out of my way, asshole."

He took one step around the human wall, then felt the bouncer's hand grab his upper arm. Kyle planted his foot and propelled his fist into the man's jaw. He stumbled back. Kyle didn't stop. He took a step forward and cold-cocked the fucker in the eye, then rammed his foot into the guy's gonads—if he had any. The bouncer let out a squeal and slowly fell to the ground.

"Let's go."

He turned, and the barrel of a pistol jabbed into his jaw.

"You, my friend, have made a mistake of epic proportion."

A wiry man with a thin goatee huffed through his nostrils. His breath smelled like rotten eggs.

Kyle froze, but even though Norma sagged in his arms, he didn't let go of her.

"We just want to leave. No disrespect to anyone," he said, trying not to move any part of his neck, where the gun barrel remained firmly pressed.

The wiry man chuckled while turning to gawk at two scantily clad women who were coming in the door behind him. Meanwhile, the human wall was back on his feet, now joined by two other Neanderthals. Kyle realized the odds were stacked against him, and he wondered where his buddies had gone.

"You shouldn't even be here. You have committed a serious crime that must not go unpunished."

A wave of emotions engulfed Kyle, with anger leading the race. He couldn't wait to see how his dad would bring in the lawyers and make this asshole wish he had never crossed paths with him.

"Take him to the back, and let's play a little game." The man waved his gun at the bouncers.

With one arm still wrapped around Norma, Kyle released a single punch to the other side of the jaw of the same bouncer. Suddenly, Kyle's entire body sizzled, and he crumpled to the floor.

They had tasered him. The next time he opened his eyes, he saw a skylight. The basic architecture of the room was the same, so he knew he was in some other room in the mansion. That was when the fun really began. He continued asking about Norma. They said the only way they would give him that information was if he sucked in a line of coke. He did this three times before he knew they were just screwing with him. His mind swirled, and he couldn't say his name without slurring the words. He wondered if the coke

was laced with some type of enhancer.

He couldn't tell if he was just hearing voices in his head or people actually talking, but he was certain he heard one phrase uttered countless times: Hombre de Polvo. He must have heard that name fifty times, whenever anyone addressed the wiry man with the gun. Later, he heard it spoken in English and that's when it made sense to him. He heard a distant voice say Powder Man.

The hallucinations only grew worse for Kyle. He had no control of his bodily functions, and words began to spill out of his mouth. It was as if he'd split into two people—his hidden self and his physical self. The former was buried deep inside his body and could hear his own violent rants, wincing at every curse word about women, Hispanics, and everyone else at that party. And his physical self, the crazy man, was yelling at the top of his lungs, out of control. All Kyle could do was try to will himself to stop, because he knew he was only pissing off all the thugs around him. How many were there? Five, six, ten, twenty? A few women in the mix, possibly, but no Norma. And that just upset him more.

When the drug-induced rage had finally robbed him of all his energy, he rolled on the floor, as tears mixed with sweat and blood dripped from his nose. Echoes of what he'd said rattled his brain. For some unknown reason, he'd boasted that he was the next Tony Montana from the movie *Scarface* and would ruthlessly control all drug trade that filtered through Mexico and into the States. He would crush those who dared to oppose his leadership. His branding and marketing would hook kids, teens, and college kids on the new coke with promises of the greatest sustained high possible.

His furious monologue had dialed back the noise level in the room to only hushed whispers from a far corner. Minutes passed, maybe more time, he wasn't sure. He thought about Norma and wondered what they were doing to her. He wondered where his buddies were, and he even thought about his parents. All of their influence and social status and money would do him no good. Not with this crowd, not after he'd fought back, and certainly not after his outburst.

"*Vamos de prisa*" he heard someone say as two bouncers lifted him off the floor.

With his shirt unbuttoned and four hairs poking from his skeletal chest, Hombre de Polvo shuffled closer to Kyle, their noses practically touching. "You are going on a little trip, my friend. And believe me, it will be a journey you will never forget. Take him away."

The gorilla men dragged him out of the room, his feet skidding across the tile. They walked right through the main room where the music blared and the mindless partying was still in full force. He could still see the remnants of the broken table and white powder on the floor. He thought about yelling for help, hoping his boys would hear him or people would wake from their stupors and help him. But it was pointless. He had not an ounce of energy, and no one

cared. He was essentially invisible.

Out the door they went. The skies were still dark. Men barked orders, and people rushed around. A trunk popped open. It was a silver Mercedes, the 500 series. They brought him around to the back. He could already smell the newness of the car. As they hoisted him upward, the clap of strong heels caught his attention. A woman marched to the car, swinging her arms with purpose. Her hourglass figure was accentuated by a gold dress that didn't reach mid-thigh. A shining moon illuminated her straight hair that was as black as a seal's wet fur. She wasn't some bimbo just along for the ride. She had a powerful, don't-fuck-with-me aura.

A man opened the car door for her, dipping his head as if he was afraid to look her in the face. Kyle was dumped into the trunk, and the lid shut before he could say a word. They made three stops that first night. On the last one, the trunk popped open. He was quickly tasered and tossed onto a discolored concrete floor. He was in what looked like a three-car garage. It was empty, except for some type of crate set off to the side, a sink, two chains affixed to the ceiling, and a metal storage cabinet. Five men and the same hot chick from the party house stood around him.

"You will tell us everything about your operation." The woman crouched lower and enunciated each word with precision and a healthy Spanish accent.

Wobbling while trying to move to an elbow, Kyle lifted his sights. She was stunningly beautiful, with almond-shaped eyes and lashes that jutted out like a bunch of tiny, black arrows. At any other time in his life, he would have put his patented moves on her. But this wasn't like any other time in his life, or even in his worst nightmare.

He let her words replay in his head. "What operation?" He rubbed his eyes, unable to connect the dots of her threat.

"More defiance. That is not good, Mr. Spencer." She nodded once, her full lips drawing together to form a sea of red. "The chains!" she barked, flipping her hand toward the wall.

Kyle tried to fend off the men, but it was pointless. He had the strength of a second-grader, and within seconds, his wrists were clasped inside metal, his toes just able to touch the floor. He could hear metal doors slamming open, and he turned to see a man in a wifebeater rummaging through the storage cabinet. He took hold of something and walked over to Kyle. Before the college kid could grasp what he was looking at, he was doused with a bucket of water. It was frigid, but after the initial shock, he lapped up the water. It tasted out of this world.

But then he turned his head and saw the man plugging in a generator. Attached to it were electrical cables. The man held the pair of claws in his hands as his face widened into a gnarly smile, his eyes nothing more than narrow slits. He reached above Kyle and clasped the end of the cable to the metal chain, then moved over to the generator and put a hand on the knob.

A soft pat on the side of his cheek, and he turned to see the woman

looking into his eyes, a heavenly perfume lingering in the air. “I have no inner desire to hurt you, but I will tell you this: once I give these men the signal, they will break you, Mr. Spencer. You will crumble into a million pieces before they are done with you. What can I do?”

She sauntered a few steps off to the side. A man that outweighed Kyle by at least fifty pounds approached him and put all of his weight into a right cross. A tooth went flying out of his mouth, which wasn’t surprising, given how he’d just been slugged with the equivalent of a lead mallet. As blood trickled across his puffy lip, he was hit with another blow, this one straight to his gut, instantly sucking all of the wind out of him.

The plus-size man with fists the size of mailboxes reached behind his head and pulled a rubber band from his ponytail. He scratched his head feverishly, and in a couple of seconds, his wild hair looked like unraveled twine. Then, he gritted his teeth and yelled at the top of his lungs. “You are fucking dead!”

“You have no idea how much we enjoy these little assignments,” said the man at the generator.

Kyle struggled to form a coherent protest, but finally pulled some words together. “But you have it all wrong. Back at the party house, I just started talking shit. I was so high on coke, I had no idea what I was saying. I’m not even sure exactly what came out of my mouth.”

From the other side of the garage, the woman took four pronounced steps. “You cannot hide your true self. We will pull it from you, one way or the other. These men are trained to extract information. They have never failed.”

He jerked his sights to each person in the garage, hoping to find a sympathetic set of eyes or even a nod, an acknowledgement of his situation. But they all wore scowls.

“I...I can’t give you what I don’t know. I swear to you, I don’t have a drug operation or anything like that. I’m just a college kid with a big fucking mouth. I’m a nobody.”

He tried to contain his emotions, but small whimpers escaped through his lips. He looked at the woman, who refused to look back. She nodded her head once, and then the man in the wifebeater turned the knob.

Kyle’s entire body felt like it had caught on fire. He screamed out loud as the smell of his burning skin loomed in the air. The jolt felt like it went on for thirty minutes, but it probably lasted for no more than twenty seconds. The longest twenty seconds of his life.

“That was just a warm-up,” the large man in front of him said. He then pounded Kyle with a dozen body blows.

“Burn him again,” the woman said.

The pitch of his shrill could have broken glass. When it finally ended, he begged for mercy, begged for forgiveness. He begged for it to stop.

They chuckled and continued the torture for the next hour.

And then they threw him in the crate—essentially a human-size,

homemade casket. He heard hammering as the lid was sealed shut, and then a drill poked a hole by his feet. They wanted him alive. Did they still think he had information that was valuable?

He jostled inside the casket as they threw it into the back of some type of van or covered truck. They traveled for hours and then stopped again. This is where the man in the wifebeater had even more fun. They pulled open the casket, and Kyle watched with horror as the man dropped in about ten tarantulas. He was told that if he moved, he was as sure as dead. So he didn't budge. For hours.

The torture of various types continued day and night. Somehow he stayed alive on nothing more than luck and a leftover candy bar.

And now, here he was. Physically, he was barely able to function. He could hardly open his swollen eyes; his throat had closed up—a likely response to the spider venom; and he had bruises and burn marks all over his body. But that didn't compare to the mental and emotional anguish he had suffered. He was a basket case.

Voices. Some sounded familiar, but at least one was different. They were speaking a combination of Spanish and English, but it was garbled. He fought the urge to cry out, knowing that if any of them were the same guys on the torture trail, they would find another reason to put him through hell.

A booming thud pounded next to his ear. It was a hammer. They had done this before, to pull out the nails and open the lid to the coffin. His last resting place. He focused his thoughts on something happy—a round of golf with his dad, playing hoops with his buddies. Anything to take his mind off the pending torture.

The pulled nails screeched, and the top board wedged open. He looked up and spotted five sets of eyes looking down on him.

"He's still alive. Can you fucking believe it?" The man in the wifebeater showed his gnarly teeth again.

Chuckles all around.

"Okay, okay, you guys have had your fun. Now we just need the final word on what to do with this gringo." A man pushed through the crowd of derelicts. He was older, his skin like an old, wrinkled sack. He had on a white shirt with green palm trees on it.

"Just ask Hombre de Polvo. He's not afraid to make the call," said the man with the wild hair.

"Not his call. Not on this one."

"What gives?" Wild Hair asked.

"We've learned that this one is special. Make that *extra* special."

Wild Hair pulled his hair into a ponytail and stretched a rubber band around it. "He's special all right. All he had to do was share the information about his drug operation."

Another voice. "We still would have tortured him. And then we could have killed him. So, what's the difference to you?"

"Nothing," said Wild Hair. "I'd rather just kill him now and move on. He's boring me. He's got no fight left in him."

The older man held up two hands. "No killing. Not yet anyway. Apparently, Kyle Spencer is the son of some very wealthy parents. 'Heir' is probably a better term. And people are asking questions. We've got to put some thought into this one here, especially when there is money involved. I'll wait until we get the decision. If we decide to kill him, we can do it cleanly right here."

There was a sliver of hope, but Kyle remained expressionless. The group broke apart and left the top of the casket off. He could hardly move, but his eyes found a sign on the near wall.

Gomez Funeral Home and Crematorium

Unless someone found him or maybe bartered some type of ransom exchange, he would be burned alive. A fitting end to a worthless life. He closed his eyes and tried to summon energy to use at a later time.

Archie lifted the frame off the built-in bookshelf and clipped a crystal vase. It teetered for a couple of seconds.

I yelled and jabbed my finger from the kitchen, “Archie!”

He slowly took his eyes off the framed picture, then as he noticed the vase dropping to the travertine-tile floor, he quickly extended his arm and caught the expensive piece just in time to prevent it from exploding into a million pieces.

I exhaled. “Damn, that was close.”

“Eh. I had it the whole time. You know I was an all-district wide receiver in high school,” he said, replacing the vase on the shelf in Teresa’s well-appointed living room.

“I figured you were the water boy.”

His brow furrowed, but he refrained from further comment, probably because he was distracted by the picture.

“So this hottie is your friend?” He held up the frame.

“Her name is Teresa. We’re in her house, estupido. And why are you surprised that I have an attractive female friend?”

He chuckled just once, then bit into his knuckle. “Attractive isn’t a word that comes to mind. More like the hottest piece of—”

“Hey, Mom...” Luke walked out from the hallway, ignoring Archie, thankfully.

I glared at Archie, then addressed my son. “Yes, sweetie, what’s up?”

“We’ve been cooped up in this house all day. I’m ready to do something.” He clapped his hands and gave me a devilish grin.

I turned my head to catch the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over Teresa’s magnificent patio, lush landscaping, and a kid’s second favorite thing in the world: a pool. Unfortunately, raindrops were a part of that view, falling from a dark, gray sky.

“Sorry, buddy. It’s still raining.”

“I don’t mind. They say it’s better surfing conditions when you got something to stir up the surf.”

“You don’t surf.”

A clap of thunder, followed by a flash in the backyard. All three of us jumped.

“And that’s why you don’t swim during a storm. Not in the pool and not in the ocean. Sorry.”

“Damn. Here—”

“Don’t cuss unless you want your mouth washed out with soap.”

“But Erin...oh, never mind. Anyway, we’re on vacation, right? We’re supposed to do crazy stuff. Or at least something fun.”

My phone started to ring. It was the call I'd been waiting on for the last hour. "Luke, I promise we'll do something fun this afternoon. Just let me take this call. Go read a book or something, okay?"

"A book?"

I tapped the phone as Archie jumped in. "I just finished a good one. Ever heard of *Fifty Shades of Grey*?"

"Archie!" I said to him even though the line was live. "Luke, you never heard that. Try to find some cool Boston Celtic videos on YouTube, and we'll go do something fun later."

He mumbled something and disappeared down the hall. I answered the call, my phone still tethered to the wall, charging. I put it on speaker.

"Alex, you there?" It was my partner, Nick, back at the FBI office in Boston.

"Uh...yeah." I kept my gaze on the hallway, wishing I could stop the rain, wondering if Luke regretted me focusing on the job again. Although this was different, since it dealt with family. At least that was what I told myself.

"Alex, can you hear me okay?"

Archie pointed at the phone as he walked up. "Right here, Nick. We're both here," he said into the speaker.

"Archie?"

That was Brad.

"Are you on vacation with Alex and the kids?"

Archie snickered.

I jumped in to try to clarify the situation.

"Believe it or not, we just happened to run into Archie in a restaurant here in Port Isabel."

"And it was a damn good thing you did." Archie seemed to puff out his chest.

"I'm sure you guys probably heard about the little incident down here a couple of days ago?" I asked my team.

Archie interjected. "Never have I been so happy to have such an enormous piece on me."

Nick snorted out a laugh. "Would you agree, Alex?" He cracked up even more, and I dropped my head into my hand.

I was usually right in the middle of the locker-room talk, but given how I'd left things with Brad, I didn't want him thinking I was shacking up with another man, especially such a tool like Archie.

"Guys, we're talking about a drive-by shooting here. My dad and his so-called girlfriend Carly were caught in the middle of the crossfire. Fortunately, the kids were at the top of the lighthouse. Archie just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And yes, I give him credit. He didn't back down. He took out two of the shooters, including one who I thought was about to kill us from point-blank range."

A second of silence.

“Alex, are you and your family okay?” Brad’s voice was laced with concern.

Hearing his caring tone warmed my heart, and I wished I could open up and share my fears. But no one knew about our enhanced relationship, or at least the possibility of one. Sharing the status of our newfound appreciation for each other was the last thing either one of us wanted at this stage.

“Dad suffered some minor cuts, but otherwise we’re all good and still in vacation mode. Thanks for asking, Brad.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt slightly exposed, wondering if my tone revealed my hidden feelings. Yet, at the same time, part of me didn’t care. I only wanted to feel his arms around me, take in the smell of his aftershave as his face nuzzled against mine.

Archie snapped his fingers. “Are you in a daze?”

I held a hand up to his face and spoke into the phone.

“Guys, I need your help.”

“I’m here too, Alex.”

“Oh, Gretchen, didn’t know you were there with the guys.”

“Actually, I’m working from home today. A little under the weather.”

Gretchen, one of our best staff operation specialists, had been hot on Brad’s trail for months. But it became all too clear for her that he just didn’t view her in the same manner. For him, she was a colleague and a friend.

Then again, that was how I would have described Brad prior to our garage kiss. I wondered if Gretchen was still in the doldrums.

“Well, I appreciate you jumping on, and—”

“I saw Archie’s interview after the shooting the other night,” Gretchen said in monotone, followed by a snuffle.

Damn, she sounded like she’d lost her best friend.

Archie leaned an elbow on the kitchen bar. “How did I come across?”

“Well, the way the reporter described your actions during the gunfight, it really made you seem like a modern-day hero.”

Brad and Nick both offered Archie their gratitude for helping to save lives and not backing down.

“No thank yous are necessary. I would do it again in a heartbeat,” he said as his eyes sparkled.

A sentimental Archie. Not sure I could get used to that.

“But what’s up with pitching your new PI website, whiteshaft.com?”

Gretchen could barely let the words escape before she broke into laughter.

For the next five minutes Nick and Brad razed the former CIA agent. At first, Archie cinched up his pants a couple of times and tried to defend himself. But it only dug the hole that much deeper. Finally, he shifted closer to me, put his hand over the phone, and said, “They’re just jealous about all the success I’ve had in the private sector.” Then he quickly nodded his head, as if he expected me to automatically follow him.

I shrugged my shoulders and tried to move us forward.

“Speaking of investigative work...” I waited another moment for the noise to die back.

“I’m not sure people think about investigative work when they see a website called whiteshaft.com,” Gretchen said in a heap of laughter.

Archie just stood there with his arms crossed, shaking his curly head, which only made me want to laugh that much more. We all had definitely shed a few tears at Archie’s expense.

“So, Alex, I know you didn’t get us on a call solely to make fun of Archie. What’s up?” Nick asked.

“Well, I wondered if you could squeeze in a couple of tasks for me, just to give me some peace of mind.”

“Related to the drive-by?” Nick asked.

“Somewhat,” I said, for some reason splitting hairs in my own mind.

“What she’s trying to say is that she doesn’t trust her soon-to-be new stepmom.”

I shifted my eyes to Archie. “Never said that. I just need more information, that’s all.”

“Okay, spin it how you like. I just think your team would be more helpful if you were transparent and didn’t play any games.”

My face went flush, fully prepared to knock Archie off his righteous pedestal. Then I took a breath and realized he was right, at least partially.

“I didn’t want anyone worrying, but anyway...In the middle of the gunfire, I had just reached Dad and Carly at their SUV. Glass had shattered all over the concrete. Dad was on the ground, tending to some guy who had a bullet in his head. Blood was everywhere.”

“What about your dad’s girlfriend Carly? Where was she?” Nick asked.

“Crouching on the ground behind him. Anyway, even with Archie doing his best to return fire, one of the shooters got out of their car and brazenly walked around another vehicle to us.”

“What the hell happened?” Brad’s voice was animated.

“My first thought was that I wished my Glock would magically appear. Fortunately, just as the perp raised his weapon, Archie blew a hole right through his shoulder.”

“Whiteshaft never misses.” Nick snorted.

“What do you need from us, Alex?” Brad asked.

“Well...” I took in breath and glanced at Archie. He rolled his arms, urging me to get to the point.

“It all happened too quickly, but part of me thinks the gunmen were targeting Carly.”

The silence was deafening.

“Brad, Gretchen, Nick?”

Nick spoke first. “We’re thinking about what you’re suggesting here, Alex.”

“I’ve been reading more about this drive-by shooting while we’re talking,

and it's apparent the DEA thinks it could be linked to drug cartel activity," Brad said.

"Well, I discussed that with the lead DEA agent. He's got a suspect in custody who admitted there was a new cartel flexing its muscle. He wondered if this was nothing more than the new guys trying to show off their power."

"What does he think about the angle that they were going after Carly?" Gretchen chimed in.

"I didn't bring it up. On purpose."

The sound of a thousand buzzing bumblebees came at us from two o'clock. Archie turned at the same time I saw it—Luke's latest drone. Just before vacation, he'd used a gift certificate from his birthday to purchase the prized possession.

"Don't tell me the CIA has lowered itself to spying on its former agents," Archie said, lifting his arm as the drone nearly shaved a wedge out of his sculpted hair.

"Sorry, bad timing on Luke's part," I said.

I could hear his giggle before I saw his face coming out of the darkened hallway.

"By the way, it's not just any drone," Luke said. "It's the Sky Viper v950HD Video Drone. The video is recorded in full 720p high-definition. It also has a six-axis gyro and accelerometer stabilization, and if you've ever flown one of these puppies, you know how important that is."

I pointed at the phone. "Remember, Mom is on a call."

"But I'm just bored, Mom. I need something to do," he said as he watched the drone fly near the windows. "And it's still raining. Jeez, I can't catch any breaks."

"Luke." I gave him the eye.

"All right, all right, I'll go back to my room and look at pictures of the Celtics dance team."

I did a double take.

"Right on, brother." Archie held out his fist, and Luke didn't leave him hanging. He bumped fists, then put his hand back on the controller.

"Thanks for encouraging him," I said to Archie.

"What, he's fifteen, sixteen years old. It's time for him to start giving everything a test run."

I made sure Luke wasn't watching, and I balled up a fist and jabbed two knuckles into his shoulder socket.

"He's twelve, so understand your audience, dipshit," I whispered.

"Ouch, you hurt me." His face scrunched into an accordion as he rubbed his shoulder.

"Hey, Luke, this is Brad."

"What's up, Brad?" Luke shifted his body and his drone closer to the phone. He actually sounded excited to hear Brad's voice.

"Did you catch SportsCenter last night?" Brad asked.

“No, missed it. What’s going on?”

“A ton, dude. First, the Celtics traded their first-round pick. But I was in such a rush, I didn’t see what they got in return.”

“What is Ainge thinking?” Luke said. “We’ve got to get younger, not continue to sign these guys with no tread left on their tires.”

Even though he’d interrupted a work call, I knew I’d interrupted his vacation. I gave him a pass and tried not to giggle at his advanced assessment.

“On top of that, the Patriots have called a press conference for tomorrow. Lots of speculation about what it could be,” Brad said.

Luke landed the drone and set the controller on the counter. “Don’t tell me that Brady might retire.”

“No one knows, but lots of rumors.”

“Belichick too?”

“I don’t know, bud.”

“I’ve got to jump on Twitter and check all the sports gossip. Thanks for letting me know, Brad.”

“No problem. And once you think you’ve figured it out, shoot me a text, will you? I’m dying to know.”

“Sure thing. Later.” Luke ran out of the room like he had a mission in life.

“Thanks, Brad,” I said as casually as I could, but deep down, he’d given me another reason to want him. He understood little boys and what made them tick. He was kind of acting like an uncle, or even a stepdad.

Nick got us back on track. “So you were saying, Alex, that you didn’t tell the DEA agent your concern about Carly being a target?”

“True, and in hearing you repeat it back to me, I’m not sure if my imagination is playing tricks on me. On the other hand, by not mentioning it, I might be further endangering Carly and my dad.”

“So you want us to dig into her life, see if there is any way she could be associated with a drug cartel or drug smuggling in general. Am I right?”

“Full name?” Gretchen asked.

“Carly Irsham.” I spelled it for her.

“I’m already on it. I should be able to start feeding you data by tonight.” I could hear the clatter of the keyboard in the background.

“Great. Thank you, Gretchen. And Brad, you’re okay with Gretchen working on this?”

“I know she can fit it in. She’s a pro.”

“Alex, have you considered what you’re going to do with this information?” Nick asked.

“I’m hoping she’s lived a boring life, and I can lower my FBI antenna and not worry.”

“What if it’s the opposite?”

“Then...I don’t know. It will depend on what’s there.”

Archie cleared his throat, and I locked eyes with him.

I took in a breath.

“Something’s up. What is it?” asked Nick.

“Archie is working a case, and he doesn’t have access to the same resources he once had.”

“And that’s supposed to mean what to us?”

“Ouch, Nicky boy. When did I ever piss in your cornflakes?” Archie said.

“Hey, it’s a local kid, from Boston,” I said. “Well, his parents live in Weston, and he’s a student at UVA. His name is Kyle Spencer, and he went missing while on vacation down here about eight days ago.”

“Wouldn’t the San Antonio office handle this one?” Brad asked.

“We tried rattling those cages,” Archie said. “And everyone there is either too busy or they just don’t see any evidence of foul play. But I guess they don’t know what I found out earlier today.”

I flicked his shoulder with my hand. “What did you not tell me, Archie?”

“I cornered Kyle’s friends coming out of the grocery this morning.”

“Nice work. And?”

“They were bickering like Ozzie and Harriet.”

“Are you talking about Ozzy Osborne?” Brad asked.

“Uh...no, junior. Before your time. Anyway, the pair were on pins and needles, not sure what to do.”

“So they said Kyle was kidnapped?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And they told no one?”

“Apparently. It all started when they went to the party house I was showing you on the bay side. It was the wildest thing they’d ever witnessed. More drugs than they’d ever seen. It frankly scared the shit out of them. So they slipped out the back window.”

“They just left him there?”

“They said he could handle himself in any situation, and to top it off, they knew he was about to score with some chick they’d met at the bungee jump.”

Alex raked her fingers through her hair. “We need to find this girl.”

“There’s more. They actually went back to the house because one of them left his wallet behind. When they peeked over the privacy wall, they saw Kyle being dragged out to a car and tossed into the trunk. That’s when this drop-dead gorgeous woman—their term, not mine—strutted out of the house and got into the back seat. The gate opened and the car left. That’s the last they saw of Kyle.”

“Are these guys brain-dead? If they’d told the police right away, they might have been able to find Kyle that night,” I said.

Archie held up a single finger. “Here’s why they got scared. While they were at this crazy party, they overheard a girl saying that among the party attendees were local cops, assistant DAs, and other officials. That stuck in their head. They felt like there was nowhere to turn. So they were just lying low, hoping Kyle would turn up and they wouldn’t be forced to go public.”

I gazed into Teresa’s dining room at the china cabinets filled with crystal.

I was trying to process everything Archie had shared.

Nick spoke while I continued thinking. “Did Dumb and Dumber get the license plate of the car?”

“Just the make and model. It was a red Mercedes sedan, 500 series.”

“I can run some searches and see what we come up with in the five counties that make up the Rio Grande Valley,” Gretchen said.

“Cool. That’s a start,” I said. “You might find fifty, you might find two hundred. That could take a while to sift through. We need more information on who owns that house.”

“Did you talk to your hot friend?”

I arched an eyebrow at Archie. “Teresa is her name. I spoke to her briefly this morning as she was running out the door. She said she would check a realtor database to see if she can figure out who the owner is.”

“Okay, let me ask the obvious question here.” Nick coughed once, then he continued. “Why can’t we call up the San Antonio office and let them take the lead?”

“Can’t,” Archie said without hesitation. “The college kids said a bunch of government bigwigs were at the party, meaning they were complicit in all the shit that went down. At least we have to assume so.”

“You didn’t mention this before, that the FBI was on the list of folks in attendance,” Nick shot back.

“But that doesn’t mean an FBI employee wasn’t there. Sounds like this party might have been hosted simply to influence or get dirt on as many officials as possible. Now, if you guys have any personal contacts in the San Antonio office that you trust, that’s another matter.”

A few seconds of silence except for more keyboard tapping. “We can always bring in the San Antonio office later. For now, let’s keep it amongst ourselves,” I said, closing the topic for now.

“I’ll step up and help out,” Brad said. “Alex, even with your friend checking on who owns the house, I’m assuming you still want us to find out everything we can about the owner of that house, any renters and so forth?”

“You got it. Thanks. While you’re at it, let’s also complete our regular due diligence on Kyle’s parents.”

I pointed at Archie’s phone and he said, “Oh, their names. Right.” He tapped his phone four times. “Thaddeus and Winifred Spencer.”

“Do you think Kyle’s so-called friends could give a strong description of the woman they saw getting into the Mercedes?” I asked.

“Even with their buddy being dragged to the car, when they mentioned the woman, their tongues were practically hanging out, so I’m guessing they could do that.”

“Let’s hope. We need to give them another visit. Let’s see if we can get a Skype session set up with our sketch artist. I also want to quiz them further about anything else they might have seen or heard. I’m wondering if they can recall any specific names. Anything would help us right now.

The doorbell rang.

“Expecting the pool boy to show up?” Archie asked.

“Funny,” I said. “By the way, set up this interview with Kyle’s friends quickly. Every day that goes by without building an evidence trail makes it less likely we’ll be able to find one, much less him, alive.”

He gave me the two-finger salute, which I easily ignored.

The bell rang again, and Luke came screaming down the hallway.

“Gotta go, Brad, Gretchen, Nick. Copy the whole team when you send out the data so we can keep everyone on the same page.”

“Including what we find on Carly?” Gretchen asked.

“Sure.”

“And by team, you’re including Archie?” Nick asked.

The PI smiled while splaying his arms. Something about him looked like a used-car salesman.

I sighed. “Sure. It just makes it easier for everyone.”

I punched the line dead and got to the front door just as Luke opened it.

“And what’s your name, little man?” Raul Marta, DEA, was bending a long stick of gum into his mouth, which reminded me of Nick and his longtime habit.

Luke held out his hand. “Luke Giordano, nice to meet you.”

A puzzled look washed across Raul’s face, but he knew better than to discuss the Giordano-Troutt name difference in front of my son.

I ushered Raul into the foyer and shut the door.

Archie pointed at the DEA agent. “Why’s he here?”

“He’s taking me along to interview the perp they picked up a couple of weeks back.” I gave Archie the eye. I didn’t want to get into the reasoning behind why I was going: to learn more about this rival drug cartel battle going on and to determine if there was any way my dad’s girlfriend could somehow be caught in the web.

He gave me a slow nod, then he turned to Raul. “I’ve got awful breath. Can you spare a piece of gum?”

Raul pulled out a crumpled stick and handed it to Archie.

“Perp. Sounds intriguing, Mom, but I thought we were going to go do something.” Luke crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. I got a strange look into the future as to what my son might look like as an adult.

I leaned on my knees to be eye level with Luke. “This won’t take long. Two hours max, then I’m all yours.”

He puffed a breath through his nose, then he turned and peered out the back windows. The rain was coming down in sheets.

“Perfect timing. We take a beach vacation, and it frickin’ rains.”

I could feel the glare from Raul and Archie. I chose not to correct Luke’s use of language this time. I rose to standing and pondered my decision-making...again.

“I can take the kids to go do something fun,” Archie said.

“You? What do you know about kids?”

“Mom, that’s a great idea. I’m game,” Luke said.

“See, the kid even likes it. Believe me, I can easily connect with kids. It’s kind of natural.”

I twisted my lips and thought for a second. Archie *was* rather juvenile. And what were my options? Teresa was at work, and her son Corey wasn’t around either. The last thing I wanted to do was encourage any type of social interaction between Corey and my impressionable fifteen-year-old daughter.

I wagged a finger at Archie. “Okay, you’ll get one shot. You mess this up, you won’t understand what hit you.”

Luke ran off whooping at the top of his lungs that he would finally be released from prison. I grabbed my purse and opened the door, then flipped back around to the babysitter. “You sure you got this?”

“Walk in the park,” Archie said between gum smacks.

“What’s your plan?”

“I’ll just wing it, go with the flow. We’ll figure it out.” He shot me a wink.

I walked out the door feeling oddly comfortable that Archie was in charge.

As we pulled up to the entrance of the small, private prison just outside of San Benito, my riding buddy, Raul, got a call. The warden said that Diego Reyna was found dead just an hour earlier, dangling a foot off the floor from a metal wire wrapped around his neck. The cause of death was ruled a suicide.

Raul immediately started cursing in Spanish. Then, after finishing his rant, he questioned how quickly this death had been ruled a suicide. He reminded the warden that Reyna's revelation about the rival cartels and their unique ranking system was probably just a small amount of what he actually knew. Although Reyna had lawyered up, Raul's plan had been to convince the prisoner to reveal the whole truth in exchange for bringing the Reyna family to the States from Mexico, all with new identities far from the border, and offering him immunity from all charges.

I heard the warden's responses and the ongoing heated exchange—even though the phone wasn't on speaker.

"I admit that our system is not foolproof," the warden said. "Just like any other sector of business, we have a few bad apples in the bunch."

Raul, who was so worked up that he was sweating profusely inside the air-conditioned car, fired back. "So you're essentially conceding that someone on your staff allowed this so-called suicide to take place."

"I...uh..."

"I don't even know why I'm using the term. We both know that Diego Reyna did not commit suicide. This was murder."

"If it was, then we will get to the bottom of it, find out who was involved and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law."

Raul's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. "You think that's going to do us any good? In case you haven't heard, murder is one of those things that you can't take back. Reyna is dead and so is our one and only hope of gaining valuable intel about how these cartels operate."

"We will reexamine all of our hiring policies and procedures to ensure there are no gaps, especially with those prisoners who are deemed as high value to the federal government."

Raul just tossed his phone to the seat without bothering to end the call. We sat in the parking lot as a rumble of thunder rattled the car's frame. I could hear the warden making some new proclamation. He was so busy covering his ass he didn't even realize that Raul had lost his patience and literally tossed him aside.

I reached for the phone and Raul shook his head. "Let the bastard talk from now until Christmas. This has happened before. Now I'm beginning to wonder if he's taking a payoff."

I pointed at the phone and whispered, "He might be able to hear you."

“Good! Fuck him and fuck this so-called justice system. Alex, we’re fighting an uphill battle, and the hill is covered in oil. We can run as hard as we can, but the progress we make is spit in the ocean.”

A few seconds passed, and all that could be heard was the soft patter of rain on the rooftop and the warden’s incessant chatter. Finally, Raul picked up the phone and ended the call. The rain had subsided into an annoying dribble. The windshield wipers on Raul’s government-issued Caprice methodically squealed with each sweep across our vision.

“Any way you can stop that? It’s giving me a headache.”

With a wrist draped across the steering wheel, Raul glanced at me, but I beat him to the punch. “Forget it. I’m just pissed, upset even...about what happened at the prison.”

He popped a knuckle off the plastic steering wheel, then wiped his hand across his face. “The bad guys outnumber us; they have more weapons, and they certainly have more money at their disposal to use for buying off officials or hiring an army of banditos to carry out any number of violent acts. And now, we can’t even keep our suspects alive. Sometimes I’m just not sure we’re capable of winning this war.”

Raul threw the car into drive and pulled back onto Highway 100, heading south.

On the way back, we stopped for a coffee. In the small shop, I watched as Raul spoke with a number of the locals. He seemed energized to interact with normal, hardworking people, those who didn’t have an agenda.

As we got back into the car, holding our coffees, I could hear Raul whistling.

“That didn’t take long,” I said, sipping on the jolt of caffeine.

He chuckled once. “You talking about my whistling?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, that and your socializing with the locals. Seems like your attitude toward life did a one-eighty.”

“My wife tells me I’m a prickly pear.”

I could tell my brow furrowed.

“I’m a bit emotional. And if something hits me the wrong way at the wrong time, I can get mighty upset in no time flat.”

“Was that an all-time record with the warden?”

“Eh. But look what happened. My positive mood might have returned, but Reyna was the kind of break that doesn’t come along often. With very little effort and money, we had a golden goose sitting just outside our door. All we had to do was entice him to walk in.”

“You know his lawyer might well have been hired by the cartel.”

“It’s very possible,” Raul said. “But there was still hope. And what else can you ask for, especially in our line of work?”

That statement hung in the air for another twenty minutes, until the windshield wipers started squeaking against the glass. Now, as I thought more about the impact of Reyna’s death on my world, I had become the one with

the sour attitude.

“You going to tell me why *you* are so upset?” he asked.

“Eh. I guess I got wrapped up in the case, in the hope that this Reyna guy would offer us some insight into who those men were that almost killed us.”

That part was certainly true, but I also had another goal—to try to figure out if there could be any connection between Carly and the thugs who shot up downtown Port Isabel. But I still didn’t want to share my fears about Carly to Raul. Not yet.

“Well, I appreciate you volunteering some of your vacation time to help me out. Not many people would do that.”

I forced a smile, gladder than ever that I had engaged the Boston team to dig into Carly’s life. “I had skin in the game, you know that. Just sorry about what happened. The reach of these cartels is truly amazing.”

I heard my phone vibrating, and I pulled it out of my purse. A text from Erin.

If u get back to spi any time soon, we’re at the turtle place

Raul drove me back to the house so I could pick up my car. He said he’d keep in touch if he learned more details about the shooters or the gang to which they belonged. I then drove across the long, arched bridge to South Padre Island. As I turned left onto the main drag, I could see slivers of blue sky amidst thinning clouds. I passed a dozen souvenir and T-shirt shops and cheap motels, and I could see the tops of some of the newer high-rise and high-end condominiums on the beach side. A mile or so north, just before the convention center, I turned left into the narrow, gravel parking lot at Sea Turtle Rescue Center.

Luke raced over and grabbed my hand before I’d made it up the ramp to enter the covered facility with no walls. “Mom, did you know this place was started by the Turtle Lady? And now look at it!”

Before I could answer his question, I was interrupted by Erin talking to a turtle in one of the tanks.

“I’m sorry someone cut off your flipper, big fella. But you’re nice and safe here.”

I was hoping her new love of turtles didn’t correlate with Corey’s college major: marine biology. Without me saying a word, the kids escorted me from tank to tank, reciting the story of each turtle and what the nonprofit organization’s plan was to rehabilitate them and send them back into the wild. We found Archie next to a smaller tank holding a tiny sea turtle in his hand. The employee encouraged Archie not to drop the little guy.

“I’m okay. It’s just that he feels so...slimy.” He lifted his head and a silly grin came over him. That was the kind of picture that would be priceless to show to his friends and colleagues. Given his CIA dismissal, Archie was a one-man team, and I didn’t know any of his friends. Then again, he’d done a pretty good job at recruiting me and my team to offer a fair amount of support for his PI business.

“How did you end up here of all places?” I asked him.

He handed the turtle back to the employee, then reached for my bare arm like he was going to wipe his hands on me.

“If you want to keep your hand attached to your wrist, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Just kidding.” He wiped his hands on his pants. “We were just down the street taking in the special screening of *Finding Nemo* and—”

“You convinced the kids to see an animated movie...including Erin?”

“They thought the old-time theatre was a hoot. The squeaky chairs where you have to lean your neck back to see the screen and you sway back and forth in the seat like you’re driving a hooty. There was something very nostalgic about the atmosphere and the movie, which they’ve apparently seen a hundred times at home. They were reciting all the lines. Luke was even doing his best impression of the rad sea turtle named Crush.”

“I understand the connection now.”

Luke ran up and nudged his head against my side. “Like totally, dude, now give me some fin.” He held up his elbow, and I bumped it with mine. I rustled his hair as he smiled at his own brand of comedy. I was relieved the kids had been able to do something different and fun. And with Archie. Who would have thunk it?

I thanked the windbag for his help with the kids—one of our few normal conversations I could recall—and then we agreed to split up. Archie went to visit Kyle’s buddies to try to get more information out of them about the night Kyle went missing. Once they were ready to describe the woman from the car, we’d have a group Skype session and I’d bring in our sketch artist. I planned on spending some time with the kids while I waited to see if the Boston team could turn up anything on Carly’s past.

Erin begged to spend a few more minutes talking to the three-legged sea turtle. She seemed legitimately concerned. It was nice to see her emotionally engaged in some living creature other than herself and her dramatic friends. Whenever she was moody or depressed, she typically would close up and only interact with Pumpkin, our ornery, oversized cat. Maybe she was an animal whisperer.

As Luke dug through my purse, searching for loose change to dump into the donations bucket, I could see Erin speaking to one of the older employees. She walked up to me with a smile on her face.

“I can tell you want something.” I gave her a knowing wink.

“Mom, I just got through talking to the manager, and they need some help cleaning out the tanks. Can we stay so I can help them?”

“Oh, that sounds cool. Can I help?” Luke jumped in.

“They asked me, not you. I’m older,” Erin said, raising her chin.

“Okay, okay, you two. Back to your corners. I’m assuming this is volunteer work?”

“Yep, but I figured it’s good experience for me if I want to be a

veterinarian.”

Sounded like the facility just needed eager bodies to do some grunt work, but I didn’t want to burst her bubble.

Sunrays angled in from the open sides of the facility, and I fanned my arms. The humidity was on the rise.

“Well, I thought we might get in a swim at Teresa’s house.”

“We can do that afterward, though,” Erin negotiated. “It will be our reward after doing some real work for a change.”

Did my daughter just say that?

“Okay, but only if Luke can help too.”

“Kick ass,” he said.

“Hey, any more cussing out of you, and I’m going to make you run laps when we get back to the house.”

“Sorry,” he said with his pretend pouty mouth.

My phone began to ring and vibrate. I reached into my purse. “Hey, guys, I’m going to be in the car. Just come on out when you’re done.”

The kids yelled something back, and I gave a quick thumbs-up to the employee who was looking at me, then I punched up the line as I walked down the ramp.

“Hey, Archie.” The line went dead.

Maybe he had dialed my number by accident. I turned to go back up the ramp, when my phone buzzed again. It was a Skype invite. I accepted it, realizing that Archie was probably in a room with Kyle’s two buddies.

“Hi, Archie.” I made it to my car, where I immediately flipped on the AC.

The black screen came to life, and I could see Archie with his arm extended, presumably holding the phone, and two guys sitting on the edge of an unmade double bed. Pizza boxes, beer cans, and clothes were scattered all over the room. A generic dolphin picture with a cheap, plastic frame was on the wall, tilting to one side.

Nothing surprising about the inside of a cheap motel room rented by two college boys.

“Glad you could join us, Alex,” Archie said. “I was just telling Trent and Ryan about all of your experience in cases like these, but how cool you were with keeping this investigation low-key for now.”

I knew he had to promise them something to open up, so I wasn’t surprised with the position he’d put me in.

I heard some other voices in the background.

“Hi, guys,” I said. “I only want to help find Kyle and get him back safely.”

“Are you really with the FBI?” The kid with cropped black hair and a SPI tank top looked into the phone and stopped fidgeting with his fingers.

“You are...?”

“Trent.”

I dug through my purse, found my credentials, and held them in front of

the phone. "Can you see that okay?"

"Looks legit to me," Trent said.

The other kid, Ryan, nodded. He had a pair of green Beats headphones around his neck.

"What's all that extra noise?"

"Oh, sorry. I'll mute the TV." Ryan picked up a remote from the carpet and punched a button.

"So how are things going, Archie?" I had no idea what new information he'd learned.

"The boys agreed to answer more questions, but they wanted to meet you first. And, being younger, they think Skype is just as good as meeting in person."

"Sure thing."

I pinged them with a couple of easy questions, essentially asking them to replay the series of events during party night. We learned the name of the girl that Kyle was trying to woo was Norma and that they met at the bungee jump place. Ten minutes into the interview, once I could see they were more comfortable with the exchange, I decided to ask them a pointed question.

"If the party house was so dangerous, then why did you guys leave Kyle there?"

Ryan turned to glance at Trent, who had started rubbing his hands together again.

Trent scratched the side of his black head of hair. "It's something I regret, big time."

"Me too," Ryan said defensively, giving his buddy a mean eye.

"Look," Trent said. "Kyle could always get himself out of any jam, whether he talked his way out or fought his way out. That's just Kyle. He's not the kind of guy you worry about in those situations. Me and Ryan like to, you know, party pretty hard, but the shit going on in that house wasn't all about partying. They were taking it too far. For some of the women...making them take drugs, and worse."

"What do you mean by worse?"

Ryan spoke up. "Some of the group sex sessions..." He shook his head, then looked over at Trent.

"We got to get this out. It just wasn't right," Trent said.

"What was it?" Archie asked before I could.

"It seemed more like gang rape, if you ask me. Not all of them, just in a couple of rooms."

"And you didn't do anything to stop it?" I asked.

Trent swiped his hand across his eyes and puffed out a breath. "Hell no, and I'm living with the nightmare. But honestly, it wasn't cut and dry. The girls didn't fight back, probably because they were so high, but it was still over the top. Just some crazy shit, man."

Trent asked if he could get some water. While he stepped out of the view

of the camera, Ryan added a new nugget of data. “You were asking earlier about everything that we saw. I don’t think we mentioned this, but I saw some guy walking around taking pictures of people. No one paid him much attention.”

“How about that one guy?” Trent said, moving back to his previous spot on the bed with a glass of water in his hand.

“What guy?” Archie asked.

Ryan pointed his finger at his buddy. “Shit yeah, that one guy with the hairy potbelly. He snapped at the man taking pictures. Not sure if it was the coke in his system or if he had a real problem with his picture being taken.”

“Did you catch his name or if he worked for any company or government agency?” I asked.

“His name? No,” Trent said. “But we overheard two girls talking about all the people who were there: county officials, police, district attorneys. And they used the generic term, the Feds. Not sure who they were referencing.”

That wasn’t a good sign. It certainly didn’t give me a lot of confidence to ring up the FBI office in San Antonio for assistance, although the Feds could have been US Marshals or DEA agents, or the girls could have simply been using the term in a generic manner.

“Thank you for that piece of information. Now, how long had you guys been gone before you decided to go back and get the wallet? And whose wallet was it?”

Ryan slowly raised his hand.

“Did you ever get it back?”

“No. Not after what we saw with Kyle being hauled off in the trunk of the car.”

I nodded. “Sorry, how long had you been gone?”

“Uh, maybe forty-five minutes or an hour. We walked around the area, went to DQ and picked up some burgers and then headed back here to the motel. I started digging for my wallet and then I realized I’d probably dropped it in the bathroom when those two girls tried to—”

“I don’t need the details, thanks,” I said.

“We jogged back to the house, which was pretty much a fortress with the concrete brick walls surrounding the entire place. We built up a pretty good sweat, and then snuck up to the side wall, where we heard a lot of voices outside. We climbed to peek over the top, and that’s when we spotted the Mercedes, and Kyle being thrown into it.”

“Before we talk about the pretty woman you saw, how many guys were out there?”

Trent sipped his water, then started counting off with his fingers. “Two carried him to the car. And I think I saw three others standing around the car. One of those fuckers had a gun.”

Ryan’s eyes got wide as he nodded. “True that. I’m almost certain it was a Sig Sauer. It looked like a P938. My dad takes that kind of gun on our hunting

trips.”

“You mentioned the red Mercedes. Did everyone squeeze into that car?”

“Actually, no. I think three of the guys followed in an older pickup truck that had one of those plastic covers over it. The truck was white and the cover on it was white with blue trim.”

“Good information, thanks,” Archie said.

“So, if I can figure out how to do this,” I said, “I think we’re ready to bring our sketch artist into this Skype session.”

Ryan flicked his hand against Trent’s shoulder and looked in the direction of the TV. “I don’t think we need to do that. There’s the chick right there on TV. She just looks a little different, but I swear it’s her.”

Archie leaned a bit to his left. “What are you guys looking at?”

The boys mumbled back and forth, while Archie’s jaw slowly opened. Then he turned to both boys.

“Are you sure this is her?” he asked as the camera rocked a bit.

Trent snickered. “I guess it could be someone who looks just like her, but if you want a sketch of the person we saw that night, we’d just say it’s that person on the TV screen.” He jabbed a finger at the TV.

Archie moved even closer, and the camera view angled toward the ceiling, then back to the orange carpeting. Back and forth it went for a few seconds. I felt like I was in a boat at sea.

“Guys, what are you looking at?” I tried not to sound annoyed with not being able to see what they were looking at.

“You guys must be smoking crack or something,” Archie said, suddenly irritated.

Now my curiosity was really piqued. “What is it? Who is it?”

No response from the boys.

I glanced up and saw Luke jogging over to another tank, helping out one of the employees. I could run over to that motel for just a few minutes. I tapped the steering wheel with my thumb four times and thought through the idea for another second. What was I thinking?

Archie moved back to his seat, but the camera still tipped up and then down.

“She’s got to be the same person, bro,” Trent said. “Who can forget that face, that body?”

Ryan shook his head. “Now that I look at her, there is something different about this chick here on TV.”

“What chick?” I asked, a little louder this time.

“This can’t be,” Archie said, ignoring my question.

Even with the AC on full blast, I could feel a surge of heat rising up my neck. I was starting to get pissed. “Dammit, guys, what the hell is going on?”

Archie did a double take toward the camera, but then quickly turned his gaze back to the TV. “It’s the craziest thing, Alex.”

I leaned forward, waiting for more. But he just kept staring with wide,

perplexed eyes.

“What the hell are you looking at, Archie?”

“It’s Cynthia.”

“The reporter?”

“Yeah, the chick from Action News.” Trent jumped in. “She’s the one we saw the other night getting into the Mercedes. Although she showed a lot more attitude the other night than she’s showing here on TV.”

Ryan clapped his hands, and Archie jumped. The phone went airborne. When things finally settled, I was staring through the lens at the ceiling and Archie’s chin. He picked the phone up and turned it to his face for a quick second. “Sorry, Alex.”

He then turned the camera on the two boys and said, “Ryan, what do you see?”

“The chick the other night had a mole just under her left eye. This chick here on Action News...nothing, see? Otherwise, they’re a perfect match.”

My pulse did double time as I thought about what this meant, or could mean, if Cynthia was indeed wrapped up in this party house and Kyle’s kidnapping. “Ryan, Trent, we need you guys to agree on this. It’s important.”

“It was kind of dark that night,” Trent said, splaying his arms to his buddy.

“Dude, it was the middle of the night, but that parking area had lights everywhere, even some shooting up from the water in that huge, round fountain.”

“Was the fountain running?” I asked before they continued their lighting debate.

They both nodded.

“So, is it safe to say you didn’t hear anyone speaking?”

“Right...well, nothing specific, just voices. It was all muffled, I guess because of the fountain,” Trent said. “And they were speaking Spanish faster than a jackrabbit.”

Trent drained the rest of his water, then he said, “Man, I could go for a cold brewsky about now.”

“Seriously?” Archie said. “Your friend is being held hostage or worse, and you want to start the party machine again? Will you guys ever grow up?”

I had to close my mouth. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing: Archie taking the high road of maturity.

“Sorry, dude, I’m just thirsty, that’s all. That’s how I quench my thirst.”

“Just get another glass of water, will you?” Archie flicked his arm in the direction of the sink.

A moment later, Trent came back into view with a wet face and holding a white towel. He wiped his face, then drank from a glass. “I’ve been trying to remember more from that night, you know.” He looked at Archie and then back to Ryan. “I think you might be right. That chick had a mole. I’m not saying I’d put a hundred G on it, but I’m pretty sure she had a mole. But,

damn, her legs were so toned, and her ass was molded like it was the template for the perfect ass.”

The two boys giggled. Their timing was something to behold.

Archie turned the camera to himself as he wiped his face with his free hand. Crow’s feet stretched from the corners of his eyes, and he was playing with his bottom lip. He was stressed like I’d never seen him.

“You’re worried that Cynthia might be involved, aren’t you?”

He sighed. “I know they say it’s a different person because of the mole, but they’re also saying the resemblance is uncanny. I need to talk to Cynthia.”

That was going to be my suggestion, but I wanted him to recognize that as a next step.

“Makes sense. And if I were you, I’d do it in person in a public place. If she’s the black widow, I don’t want to have to start a manhunt looking for you.”

“Oh, Alex, you’re making me feel...wanted. Thank you.”

“That’s overstating it a bit. You’re necessary; how’s that?”

Out of the corner of the frame, I could see the two guys having their own conversation, pushing each other playfully and generally talking trash.

“You don’t even know a lick of Spanish, dickhead,” Ryan said to Trent.

“What do you know? *¿Dónde está el baño?* You just memorized that phrase so you could ask where to take a leak.” Trent chuckled at his buddy.

“I figured out what those girls were saying about their supplier,” Ryan boasted, sticking out his chin.

“What supplier?” I asked as the picture of the boys tilted left so much I wanted to turn my head in that direction.

“These two bitches—”

Trent elbowed Ryan, who then said, “Oh, sorry. These two girls were practically salivating at the thought of this one guy showing up at the party. Said he would hook them up long-term, and they wouldn’t have to wait until the next party to get the best coke they’d ever snorted.”

“Did you catch his name?”

“Hombre de Polvo,” Ryan said. “No need to look it up on Google translator. I already did.”

Ryan chuckled once and looked in Archie’s direction. No response. He wasn’t smiling.

“Anyway, it means Powder Man. Makes sense, huh?”

I made a mental note about where to go with that information.

“Dude, you got any leftover Cheetos? I’m starving,” Ryan said. The kids got up and sifted through plastic bags on the floor.

Archie turned his camera to face himself. “Their ten-minute attention span is over.”

“I think we got everything we can at the moment. You’ll talk to Cynthia?”

“I’m on it, or her.” He tried to giggle, but his grin quickly disappeared.

“Damn, I thought she was ‘the one’ too.”

“She still could be, Archie. But when you talk to her, you can’t reveal too much.”

“I know, I know.”

Something slammed against my driver’s side window. I jumped and hooted, then turned to see Luke’s oversized lips pressed against the glass.

“Everything okay, Alex?”

“Yes, just Luke trying to scare me.”

“Mom, I’m ready to go now,” Luke said through the glass.

“Archie, I can’t fake it any longer. I need to go be Mom for a while. Let’s touch base later this evening and compare notes.”

The kids barreled into the car. They reeked of foul water. I restricted the airflow through my nose and declared it was time to get some ice cream.

“Before dinner?” Luke exclaimed, turning toward his sister, his mind clearly blown.

“We’re on vacation. Anything goes, at least when I give the okay.”

We headed south on the main drag, then came to a stop at a red light.

“Look, Mom, it’s Captain Rex!” Luke pointed to the right at a smaller cross street.

I saw a man with the same wide-brimmed hat and sleeveless shirt from the day on the beach, driving a green four-wheeler. The mini vehicles were often rented out on the island. He had a bunch of crap in the back. He seemed like such a pack rat. He was pulled over to the side, talking to two ladies with shopping bags in their hands.

“He could talk to a brick wall,” I said without a filter.

“What’s up, Mom? You don’t like Captain Rex?” Luke asked.

“I didn’t mean anything. He just likes hearing himself talk.”

“I wonder how the search is going for the lost treasure from the crime of the twentieth century.”

“I’d say he’s working really hard to find it.”

“Remember, he’s writing a book too. He might be interviewing someone important over there.”

I doubted it, but I didn’t want Luke to see my cynicism. “Could be. Who wants birthday cake gelato?” I asked.

Two kids screamed, “Me!”

I set my phone on the glass mosaic table next to the chaise lounge and tried to clear my mind for a couple of seconds. I tipped back my head and swallowed a mouthful of white wine—the leftover from the previous night with Teresa.

I was sitting alone, listening to cicadas chirping away as I scanned the immaculate pool and landscaping. Teresa was working late, and the kids were in bed.

The light from the full moon shimmered across the aqua pool. The placement of the light seemed almost fake, like it was part of a movie set

design.

“Damn, Teresa, you’ve got the life,” I said out loud.

I swirled the wine in the glass, then drank another sip, thinking about the video I’d just watched for the fifth time in the last thirty minutes. The duration was only thirty seconds, but it unnerved me.

Gretchen had been able to hunt down a video that one of the bystanders took of the shooting outside the Italian restaurant. It reminded me of video footage I’d watched on the news as a kid, when a cameraman was right in the middle of bedlam, some type of civil war in a country thousands of miles away.

But this one took place in my own backyard, so to speak. The sheer number of gunshots was mind-boggling. The bad guys had a ton of ammo. And Archie’s response saved lives. He waved and shouted at people to get down as he fired back. Windshields, glass fixtures, and potted plants exploded around him, but he held his ground and continued returning fire until he hit two of the shooters. He was nothing short of heroic. I just wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to admit that to him. Knowing Archie, he would never let me hear the end of it. I shuddered at the thought of the favors he would conjure up if I made a bigger deal about his actions.

Seeing the shootout from a different angle was alarming in another way. It all but validated my fears that Carly was being targeted. Without the cover of the green and gold bandana, one of the shooters slid out the door of his car, firing at Archie while he made his way over to the space between my dad’s black Escalade and the SUV next to it. In the video, I could see him hesitate just for a second as he peered around the Escalade, then he continued turning in that direction, once he saw his intended prey.

From the perspective of this video and my own recollection, his target was most likely Carly.

I couldn’t wait any longer. I had to talk to my dad, or my dad and Carly, to find out once and for all what she had done to garner such attention from this drug-related gang. I’d already called Dad a few minutes earlier, but it had rolled to voicemail. I needed to speak to him in person. In the morning perhaps.

A light breeze blew across my face, and I recalled a conversation I had with Raul just a few hours earlier. I had accidentally interrupted his late family dinner.

“No worries, Alex.” I could hear flatware clang against dishes and kids talking at a high volume. “Let me walk outside so I can hear you better.”

I had given him an overview of Archie’s case: the missing student, Kyle Spencer, and the subsequent interview we had conducted with Trent and Ryan. Not wanting to drag him into all the messy details of government officials possibly being involved, I decided to focus on what he might know about Powder Man, Hombre de Polvo.

“Not a damn thing. Never heard the name before.”

Frankly, I'd been shocked. Raul seemed like he had his ear to the ground regarding just about any nefarious activity in the Valley. For a split second I'd thought I heard a hesitation in his voice and wondered if he actually might have known something about Powder Man, or even the party house. Representatives from county, city, and maybe even federal government agencies had likely been in attendance. And the boys mentioned a man walking around taking pictures. Those could only be used for one thing: to frame a person in a certain position to take a certain action, possibly ignore criminal activity.

I'd decided to keep most of my information to myself and see if Raul would come through with anything noteworthy to help us pick up the trail of Kyle Spencer. Part of me felt paranoid for not completely trusting Raul. His reaction to when he learned about the murder of his prisoner, Diego Reyna, seemed authentic. Authentically angry at the warden and the corruption in the system.

Raul had called me back within the hour with a surprising amount of energy. Through the help of one of his undercover agents in the field, he had connected Powder Man to a real person.

"What's up, Alex?"

I nearly knocked over my wine as I strained to look over my shoulder.

"Oh, hey, Corey. Your mom's still at work, so it's just me out here."

Wearing a swimsuit and a tank top that showed off more than enough chest hair, he sauntered past me and sat down in the chair six feet away, a shit-eating grin on his face. It gave me a chance to replay what he'd just said. He'd called me Alex.

"By the way, my name is Ms. Troutt, or if you really want to be formal, you can call me Special Agent Troutt."

"You serious?" he chuckled.

"As hell."

He was leaning on his knees, as if he had something to share. As much as I wished he'd just go inside, I was more comfortable with him being outside talking to me than sneaking into Erin's room...or worse, her doing the sneaking around.

An instant headache actually hit me in two places on my forehead, and I pinched the corner of my eyes.

"You feeling okay?" he asked.

"Fine. How was your day of work, or fun or whatever you did?" I asked with little enthusiasm. I took another sip of the vino. Yeah, that would help my headache.

"Oh, did a little of both. Got up, left early, and spent most of the day out on the boat catching shrimp, and then I hung out with some friends on the beach."

"Sounds like your mom and me back when we were younger."

"Cool," he said.

It just hit me that I had plans in the morning, and my new, reliable kid-sitter, Archie, wouldn't be available to help out.

"Hey, Corey," I said, looking in his direction briefly. "Do you know if your mom is busy tomorrow morning? I got this thing I need to go do, and it would be helpful if she could entertain the kids."

"Hell no," he said, shaking his head while still smiling. He looked like he wore a perpetual three-day beard and was age thirty-one, not twenty-one.

"She's busy?"

"I don't even have to ask. She's always busy, always working. When I ask if she ever takes time off for herself, she just says, 'How do you think we can afford all this?'" He scrunched his shoulders, trying to emulate his mother.

I puffed out a breath. "I might just have to send Archie off by himself then."

"What's going on?"

"Oh, just some work stuff I'm being pulled into. It's nothing." I sipped the last few drops from my glass, then held it up to the light of the moon.

A moment later, Corey was standing over me holding the bottle of chardonnay.

"Refill?"

"Uh..." Before I finished my answer, Corey had topped off the glass. While he was technically legal to drink, there was no way I was going to ask him to join me. He sat back down, leaned on his elbows again, and stared at me with his boyish smile.

I flipped my legs around until my feet landed on the outdoor tile. We were now looking straight across at each other. "I think you need to know, Corey, that this little flirtation thing you've got going on with me...I'm flattered, but you need to know that nothing will ever happen. And I mean never." I had given him a partial truth. I wasn't flattered at all. I was more creeped out that he was such a player and could wrap Erin around his hairy finger in about five seconds.

Losing his smile, he looked over at the pool for a moment, then returned his gaze to me.

"It was worth a shot. What can I say?"

I shrugged my shoulders and focused on my wineglass.

"Ms. Troutt, I hope you're not offended. You're a very pretty woman. And I've always been attracted to older women...uh, I mean, women who are older than me. I'll drop the charming Corey and just be normal, I guess."

"Thanks. Appreciate that."

"I can help you out, though."

"How?"

"I can watch after Luke and Erin."

I bet he could. "That's okay. They just need some time with their momma."

“Seriously, I know you think I’m this Casanova college kid who is just waiting for the chance to hit on some younger girl, but I can assure you I have no attraction to your daughter. No offense.”

I tried not to eye him, but I did. His response and his body language seemed genuine.

“I can see you may not believe me. I can give you my phone, and you can call anyone on my contact list. They’ll tell you the same thing. I don’t think I’ve ever dated a girl that wasn’t at least three or four years older than me.” He held his phone out to me.

I crossed my legs and kicked my foot a couple of times, searching for a hint of dishonesty. Nothing obvious.

“You could be bullshitting me, and I might not even know it. And then tomorrow you could do something to my little girl that would haunt her for the rest of her life.”

“You don’t pull any punches, do you?”

“Not when it comes to my kids, no.”

His chest filled with a deep breath of air. He glanced at the pool while popping a knuckle. “A few years ago...” His tone had softened. “Jess, my sister, died in an accident. She would be about Erin’s age, I guess.” He swallowed hard.

“Corey, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.” I wanted to reach out and touch his arm, but given his propensity for older women, I kept my hands to myself.

“Yeah, she was pretty cool. We hung out, talked. I was pretty lucky.”

His eyes became moist.

“Your mom never told me. I’m stunned...and really sorry for your loss. I know it must be difficult for you.”

A few thoughts of my deceased husband crossed my mind, but they left just as quickly.

“I had a feeling you didn’t know about it. Mom tends to keep everything inside. But...well, I just wanted you to know.”

“Thanks for telling me, Corey.”

“So, to make all of this a little more positive, I’d be happy to help out tomorrow. I’m not working or anything. And Erin and Luke seem pretty cool.”

I raised my glass. “I’ll take you up on the offer. Thanks.”

Then I reminded myself to talk to Erin to ensure she didn’t view Tall, Dark, and Hairly as anything more than a cousin or brother. And that might not be an easy conversation.

Archie arrived at Teresa's house before the kids had awakened with a smile on his face and a large coffee in hand.

I returned the smile so I could accept the shot of java without any guilt. We then drove just over twenty miles southwest from Port Isabel. I'd forgotten how many palm trees were in Brownsville, the biggest city in the Valley at just under two hundred thousand residents. While a good part of the Valley had been through its share of heartaches over the years, unemployment leading the list of woes, Brownsville had grown, some from fellow Texans looking for warm days and low cost of living, and the rest from simple commerce. It was a major crossing point into Matamoros, Mexico, both for trade as well as college kids looking for a little more freedom in the partying department. At least that was my recollection from a number of years back.

"You think he's going to sit in his car all day?"

Sitting behind the wheel of his rented blue Camaro with two white stripes stretching up the hood—Archie apparently had a thing for Camaros or a man-crush on the guys who starred in *Hawaii Five-O*—he lifted his mirrored sunglasses. The lenses were as big as two saucers; he looked ridiculous.

We eyeballed the idle vehicle we had tailed into downtown Brownsville.

"I'm skeptical," he said.

"You just used a three-syllable word. Have you been reading something other than porn magazines?" A smile emerged from my lips as I kept my gaze on the car with a cracked side-view mirror.

He shifted his eyes to me, then back to the subject of our surveillance, Ricardo Bolivar, the so-called Powder Man, if we were to believe Raul's undercover agent. Archie decided to ignore my jab. "This guy could be a new player in the party drug scene in South Texas, yet he drives a rusted Monte Carlo where the bumper is peeled off. On top of that, from looking at this mug shot Raul sent you..." he tapped his phone three times, then angled it to me, "...this guy looks like he spends all of his time playing Dungeons and Dragons, or whatever game young people play today."

"That picture is ten years old," I said. "Taken when he was arrested for driving under the influence of marijuana."

"And that's his only offense?"

"The only one he's been arrested for, yes. Raul reminded me that the people you least think could be drawn into the criminal web of drugs are sometimes the most egregious offenders."

"Could be," Archie said as if I didn't understand Raul's qualifier.

Damn, he could be annoying.

I took the phone from Archie and examined the photo, then peeked out the window and studied the profile of the man sitting in the front seat of the

Monte Carlo. I then looked back at the photo. Same jawline, but it was more pronounced. From what I could see of his hair, it was black, stringy, with uneven ends. And then there was his hump nose.

I pointed at the nose. "At least we have the right guy. Can't mistake that nose," I said.

He nodded. "But what's his play? His sitting in his piece-of-shit car with it running?"

"We've got movement." I inched up in my bucket seat.

Bolivar opened a newspaper, then moved it back about a foot from his face. "He needs readers," I said.

"Wonder if that's a sign."

"That he needs readers?"

"No, silly. He might be sending some type of message to someone who's looking at him. Crap, I think we've been fingered." He twisted his torso left and right. I followed suit, just in case I'd missed someone walking up behind us through my passenger-side mirror.

"I only see regular folks walking the street, although I know any of them could be involved," I said, suddenly paranoid about every little old lady, or mom walking behind a stroller. I even did a double take on a man in a wheelchair.

"You never know who's watching us from the second floor of one of these buildings." Archie leaned forward while removing his glasses, craning his neck to look upward. Just then, a piece of bird crap splattered on the windshield, just above his watchful eyes. He jerked his head and rammed it into the rearview mirror.

"Fuck! Damn birds only target my car since it's the cleanest one in Brownsville."

"Murphy's law. I guess you didn't know that, because Brownsville has so many water reservoirs, it's become a key nesting area for all types of birds."

Archie couldn't be bothered with reasoning. He was too focused on righting the wrong. He twisted a lever. Fluid sprayed across the windshield, and wipers swooshed back and forth. But it didn't net the desired result. A smear of drying crap arched across our vision.

"That's what happens in the hot Texas sun."

"Now I can't see shit!" he declared, shifting his head up and down.

"That's all you can see," I said with a chuckle.

"Very funny, Special Agent Troutt."

We traded knowing grins, then I downed the rest of my coffee and set the empty in the cup holder.

Just then, the Monte Carlo door swung open, and Bolivar exited, leaving the crumpled newspaper behind him. He had on a frayed, gray T-shirt that barely reached his thin waist. His hairy legs looked like pencils under his sagging denim shorts. He adjusted his sunglasses, looked up and down the street, then walked over to the curb, through an area full of outdoor tables

covered by umbrellas, and then inside a café.

"He's probably meeting someone inside," Archie said with one hand on his door handle.

"You don't think you're going in after him, do you?"

"Can't let him get away."

"You don't exactly blend in with the locals, Archie. You look like you stuck your finger in an electrical socket. On top of that, your glasses aren't subtle. They're something out of a 1980s cop show."

He swatted a hand my way. "Eh, you're just not into looking cool, Alex."

"Not your kind of cool."

He popped the handle on his door and leaned out.

"Give it a few minutes, will you? This is surveillance only. We just want to see where he goes, who he talks to. I doubt he'll take us right to Kyle Spencer, but if he talks to anyone, then we can take some pictures and see if the Boston team can help us make a connection."

He shut the door. "All right." He propped his fist under his chin like a kid who'd just been rebuked. Which he was.

A couple of cars with missing mufflers sped by us, leaving a plume of gray smoke we could smell inside the air-conditioned car.

"Damn teenagers," Archie said as he quickly moved to switch the AC to recycle.

A minute later, a middle-aged woman walked by with what I presumed to be her son and daughter. The boy had on a Los Angeles Dodgers cap, and the girl kept a stuffed tiger nestled against her neck. They were all laughing about something. I figured they were on vacation.

I thought about my conversation with Erin earlier in the morning.

"So you do know that Corey is six years older than you?" I had whispered while sitting on the edge of her bed.

She wiped her eyes and squinted from the morning sun shooting through the slats of the blinds.

"Mom, I'm not sure why you're telling me something I already know," she said with her typical early-morning hoarse voice.

"Sweetie, I'm not blind or stupid. Corey is a good-looking young man, and I know you see that. You should just view him as more of a cousin or big brother."

I knew I needed to figure out a way to approach Teresa about the touchy subject of the tragic death of her daughter. Until then, I didn't want to burden Erin with it.

Erin coughed out a laugh. "Mom, to be honest with you, I thought Corey was gay."

"Gay!"

"Shh," she said, as if she was the mom.

"I don't think he's gay, but if that works for you..."

"Like you said, he's a hunk, but I was only talking to him at the beach

because of what his major is in college. Marine biology sounds cool, at least at this stage of high school."

College boy crush had been averted.

A laser beam of sun pierced my eye, and I held up my hand. The rays had reflected off the side mirror, and I scooted as much as I could to the left.

"Too bad we don't have bench seats." Archie removed his sunglasses so I could see him pop his manscaped eyebrows.

"In your dreams, buddy."

"Actually, my dreams have been very focused on one hot Latin diva the last couple of nights."

He used the controls on his door to angle the passenger-side mirror so that the sun wouldn't shine in my eyes. "Thanks. I almost forgot to ask—how did your conversation with Cynthia go last night?"

He winced, which made him look constipated. It wasn't pretty.

"Not well? Is she pissed at you for asking questions about where she was two nights ago?"

"Not exactly."

I tried to lock eyes with him, but he kept his focus on the café.

"What do you mean by 'not exactly'?"

"Well, we talked, and...I didn't quite get to the tough questions."

"What questions did you ask her?"

"If she wanted to meet up for drinks tonight."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up a finger.

"I've got an out. She said she had something to talk to me about. So, I didn't want to freak her out. I figured I'd go, listen to her—"

"And melt from looking into her big, brown eyes," I said.

"She is kind of like Medusa, minus the part about turning me into a statue."

"Is Archie smitten?"

His cheeks turned pink. "Oh, I don't know. Probably just love at first bite."

"You mean sight. Love at first sight."

"That too." He winked at me.

"I don't want to burst your love bubble, but you do realize she could be a key person in Kyle's disappearance? In fact, you might be in danger just by bringing up this topic to her."

"I'll be fine. I know the boys said Cynthia is a carbon copy of the lady they saw that night getting into the Mercedes, minus the mole, but whether it's the mole or just knowing her the way I do, I'd bet my CIA pension it's not her."

Archie had known her for less than seventy-two hours and he was acting like they'd been married for ten years. Maybe three days was ten years in Archie Land.

He opened his center console and pulled out a pair of miniature binoculars

and put them up to his eyes.

“See anything?”

“A few people standing in line, some sitting down and talking, but I don’t see our Powder Man. I can’t see the entire space all that well. He could have escaped out the back.”

I pondered that thought. “Only if he knew we were following him. But if he is at the center of this possible extortion, drug thing, then he certainly wouldn’t worry about leaving a crappy car behind.” I picked up my phone and found the records I received the night before. “Then again, according to information that Gretchen pulled late last night, Bolivar has been living at the same one-story residence for four years. Tax records value the home at ninety-seven thousand. Very modest, even by Valley standards.”

I glanced up. As if on cue, Bolivar came out of the café with a can of soda and a small plate of food. He sat down at a black wrought-iron table under the shade of a large, blue umbrella. He looked up and down the sidewalk as he drank from his can.

“He’s expecting somebody,” I said, leaning a little closer to the window.

Bolivar reached behind his back and pulled out a curled-up magazine.

“He’s like a magician. I never saw that magazine when he went in,” I said. “Can you tell the name of it?”

Archie adjusted the focus on the binoculars. “Looks like *Dave Campbell’s Texas Football*. An Aggie and a Longhorn are on the cover.”

I nodded. “It’s the early preview of this fall’s football season for all the high schools and colleges in Texas. I think Dad has every one that’s ever been published.”

“Wonder if it’s another signal.”

“It’s possible. But he could just be into football and wanted to read his magazine while he ate.”

I reached to the side of my seat and leaned it back a few inches, trying to find a comfortable angle. “How many surveillance assignments have you been on?”

“A hundred or more.”

“A hundred, huh? Has it been a while?”

“Since I had sex, yeah. Why do you think I’m chasing Cynthia like a dog in heat?”

“TMI, Archie. Has it been a while since you’ve worked surveillance? Most of the time, it’s boring as hell and we don’t get anything on the suspect.”

He lowered his binoculars and gave me a look of indignation. “I’m not naïve,” he said slowly, as he played more with the settings on the glasses. “But I’ve got a feeling about this one.”

A few minutes passed, and I checked my watch. Just after two in the afternoon. I didn’t want to burden Corey too much with watching Erin and Luke, plus I still needed to find time with my dad to discuss Carly and how she could possibly be connected to the drive-by shooters. I needed data,

though. I knew it would get emotional, heated even, if I didn't have something to back up my theory. And the video would only do me so much good. I sent a group text to the Boston gang.

Anything turn up on Carly?

A moment later, my phone buzzed. I looked down at the text.

I miss your lips

My heart skipped a beat as I poked and padded at the phone. "Please tell me he didn't send a group text," I said rapidly.

"Who did what?" Archie asked.

"Nothing." I scrolled up and found Brad's name only. I exhaled loudly. Then I considered his text for a moment. He was thinking about me. I thought about how to reply, and then I typed in the following:

Believe me, I'm the one missing out. Wish you were here with us.

I tapped 'send,' then returned my focus to the café.

My phone buzzed twice in about ten seconds.

"Oh shit."

"What now?" Archie asked.

I spotted the header of the text and realized I had sent my text to the entire group. Then, Gretchen replied with a quick question.

Who are u sending this to?

I could feel tension shoot through my shoulders and into my neck. I put a hand on the phone, but before I could figure out a witty response, Nick chimed in.

Wish I was at the beach too, but not with you guys. Sorry. Think you meant this for someone else. Who could that be???? Gang, we've got another mystery to solve.

"Spiraling out of control," I said as if the secrecy dam of my relationship with Brad had just cracked more holes than I had fingers.

"Kid issues?" Archie asked.

"Uh...no. I wish."

"Oh. There's only one other kind, and I figured you were still on the sidelines."

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I ignored Archie's comment and stared at the phone, afraid to touch it, that it might blow up in my face. It kind of already had.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed. It was Brad...in the group text.

Just what we need, another mystery. We're already doing two jobs for you, Alex. Now you're going to drag us into another one. Oh well...just another day at the office.

I exhaled, and my shoulders dropped a couple of inches. I couldn't believe how much stress I felt by being outed in my relationship with Brad. Did that mean I was embarrassed by him? Did I think my feelings for him were nothing more than a schoolgirl crush that would pass as soon as the next warm front blew in? I wiped my face with both hands, wondering if I truly

needed this relationship drama in my life.

Another buzz from my phone. I looked down to see it was Brad again, but I noticed it was sent directly to me.

I bet ur stressed by the text messages. Just know that I'm ok with us being a secret. One day we can hopefully take that next step. Enjoy the time with Erin and Luke. Thinking of u.

Just when I thought I'd been dreaming up all these feelings I had toward him, he came back with that sweet message. I couldn't deny the strange sensation inside—a mixture of unbridled excitement and comfort. Being desired and cared about didn't hurt my self-esteem, that was certain. And I couldn't stop thinking about him, our magnetism. Then why was I afraid to come out of the closet?

I looked up just as someone smacked a flyer on Archie's windshield. He cracked the door and pulled the purple piece of paper inside. He hollered to the guy, who was walking away, "I saw the sign earlier. Don't mess with Texas. That means stop littering, buddy."

Once the door was shut, he said, "You and the kids thought about going to the Brownsville Zoo?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Apparently, they have some special exhibit of cougars that are on loan from the DC zoo, and it's a big deal."

Archie nailed it, for once. I felt like a frickin' cougar with Brad. That was my embarrassment. People would probably look at me as more of his mom than his girlfriend. I could feel my shoulders stiffen. I rubbed the back of my neck and tried to stretch my arm across my body. Anything to loosen the muscles.

"Want me to tie your arms in a knot? I've seen a chick do that once before," Archie said.

"No thanks," I said, realizing my stomach felt like I'd swallowed a small hairball. But why? I'd finally identified my apprehension. Outside of the age factor, Brad had shown to be a great match for me. He was kind, considerate of my feelings and to mankind in general. He connected with the kids well, and I had to admit, he was the most desirable man I'd ever laid eyes upon. His soft, gentle kiss while I gripped his rippled arms and shoulders literally gave me the goosies.

I quivered.

"You okay?"

"Yes," I said calmly, forcing myself to look back across the street with one remaining thought. Would I ever be okay with taking the next step with Brad? Not just sex, but coming out of our closet. Because I had a feeling if I did the first, I'd want to shout it to the world. I wasn't a college senior. I had to plan these things out...for the kids and for my sanity.

A quick image came to me—Brad in a bathing suit, soaking wet, strutting out of the ocean toward me. *Damn, I just got hot.* "Is the AC still working?" I

turned the air duct to ensure I could feel it against my face.

“We’ve got a visitor,” Archie said with binoculars to his face.

I looked over to the café and saw a man sliding into the seat opposite Bolivar. The man wore a black San Antonio Spurs cap backward, old flip-flops, shorts with strings hanging down his legs—which did have decent muscle tone—and a basic T-shirt. He had a day’s worth of stubble on a face that was darker than Bolivar’s pasty white.

“You got an angle to take any pictures of this guy?” Archie asked.

The man carried a cell phone, almost like a prop. The two spoke, and then Bolivar turned the magazine around and pointed at something on an inside page.

“Think he’s got a special code for Spur Man?”

“He could. Or maybe they’re debating who will win district in high school football.”

“Surely can’t be the Fighting Tampons.”

“What?”

“Port Isabel. Your old school.”

He tried not to smile, but I’d heard that phrase a thousand times, about a thousand years ago. Any rival school always tried to poke us with that phrase. Revenge was always the best response. I’d go out and kick their asses in tennis. But in Texas, football ruled. And if someone called you a tampon and you got your ass kicked in football, then the whole school felt the ridicule for an entire year.

“It’s Tarpons, asswipe.”

“Touchy, touchy.” He brought the binoculars back up to his face. “Spur Man just crossed his legs and put his arm on the chair. Very casual of him. You might have a better angle now.”

I raised my phone and zoomed in closer.

“What the hell?”

“What now, Alex?”

“I think I—”

“Spit it out, will you? We finally have a fish on the hook and you’re afraid to pick up my rod.”

I slowly turned my head in his direction with a single eyebrow arched.

“What can I say, I tried to slip it in.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You know me, I have fun in the most warped way possible.”

“If you still worked for the CIA, I’d turn you in for sexual harassment.”

“I was more worried that you were going to kick my ass.” He brushed a hand across his forehead.

“Tempting, but it’s hot enough outside.”

I flipped my head back to the two men at the table, wondering if my eyes had deceived me earlier.

“You’re supposed to be taking pictures, right? That’s why we’ve been sitting here for hours and hours.”

“I don’t think I need to take a picture. I know this guy.” I pointed at the man with the Spurs hat.

“You know a drug dealer? What have you been doing while you’re on vacation, Alex?”

“Funny, Archie. I’m almost certain I knew this guy when I was back in high school.”

His face scrunched into a prune. “That’s been over twenty years, Alex. You sure you’re not being overly nostalgic since you’re back in your hometown?”

The man shifted again, now facing Bolivar. A waitress came outside and talked to both of them. He spoke, and she walked away. My point of view was worse now. Doubts were creeping back into my head.

“You just lost your chance to get a picture. What’s going on with you, Alex?”

About fifty feet south of the two men, I spotted a man behind a rolling cart with a sign on it that read “Tommy’s Tortillas – a buck each.”

I opened my hand toward Archie. “You got any cash on you?”

He patted his pants while saying, “Why do I have to pay?”

“Don’t whine.”

“You pick now to be hungry,” he said, peering into the middle console.

“Just hurry up. I don’t want to miss the opportunity.”

“But why don’t you just pay?”

“I don’t carry cash usually. I go for points on my credit card.” I snapped my fingers.

“All right, all right,” he said. “Wait...” He leaned down and peeled back the floor carpet, grabbing a few bills. “Here we go. I’d forgotten that I hid it, just in case we got carjacked.”

“What? Why would you think that?”

“Hello, we’re two miles from the border, stupid.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Every Hispanic is also a gun-toting thief.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I’m kind of stupid, aren’t I?”

I snatched a ten out of his hands and jumped out of the car, letting him think about that one while I padded across the street. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a few people strolling up and down the sidewalk. Through the cover, the two men were still in conversation, not looking my way. I paused for a second and let two cars go by, then continued my trek.

“Buenos dias,” said the man wearing a sombrero and a fake mustache.

Obviously, he was targeting tourists.

“What can I get for you?”

“I’ll take a corn tortilla.”

“Coming right up.” He opened a canister, and steam curled into the humid air.

I rested my elbows on the counter and slowly turned my head toward the café. Three ladies had stopped just outside an antique shop. They were

blocking my view.

“One hot tortilla. Here you go.”

He handed me the tortilla rolled up in aluminum foil, and I stuck out my hand with the cash.

“Oh, sorry, I can’t break a bill that large.”

“A ten, really?” I thought about giving him the tortilla back. I pretended to scratch my shoulder blade and glanced toward the café. I had a clear sight path. My pulse doubled. It had to be him.

“Do you want more tortillas?”

I asked for nine more, gave him the ten, and scooted back over to the Camaro. Once I shut the door, I dumped them in Archie’s lap.

“Shit, they’re hot!” He shoved all but one on the floor. He put the last one on the center console, peeled off the cover, and picked up the piping hot tortilla with two fingertips.

He blew on it and then took a bite. “Damn, this is amazing,” he said while chewing.

I took one more look across the way. I couldn’t believe it was him. He had the same strong chin, his skin like polished clay. He’d never had a blemish all throughout high school. I used to call him Hollywood, because of his good looks. And he had those syrupy, honey eyes. I knew he’d grow up to be something special, whether he was an actor or maybe a famous director, or even a writer. He had written me a number of poems.

But now look at him. He never made it out of the Valley. He was forty and working as some kind of drug dealer, or maybe worse.

“Did you get his picture?” Archie asked with another mouthful of tortilla.

“Not needed. It’s Mario Alvarez. My high school boyfriend.”

After texting the name of my old beau to Gretchen so she could do her research drill, I relieved Corey and picked up the kids.

“Anything you want to do, I’m game,” I said to them, looking to temporarily rid my mind of Mario and what had gone wrong to lead him to where he was today.

Then I smelled something that made me want to hurl. “Who needs to use the restroom?” I asked, punching my window down.

“Luke stepped in it back at the barn,” Erin said. “Didn’t you hear us when we got in the car? Corey’s friend works at the stables, and we got to ride horses down the beach. It was an absolute blast.”

I could somehow identify with Luke, feeling like my nose had been stuck in it, with all the disturbing reminders from my past and how imperfect it had been...and apparently still was.

We decided on putt-putt and go-carts. I asked to borrow a hose when we arrived at the facility, which had been considered old even when I was a teen, and washed off the bottom of Luke’s Teva. We each grabbed a different color golf ball, and then we hit the golf course. Unfortunately, the miniature golf course—and all the associated obstacles—hit back. On the fourth hole, Erin attempted to knock her ball in between the rotating blades of a tiny windmill. She caught it just right...or wrong, depending on the perspective. The bouncing, dimpled ball caromed off the spinning blade, then ricocheted off a concrete wall on the next hole and smacked Erin just under her eye.

Her scream could have been heard ten miles out at sea. When I finally peeled her hand away from her face, I saw purple, black, blue, and one puffy eye. The owners were nice enough to comp our round of golf and give Erin a bag of ice. After sitting in the boiling sun for a few minutes—during which I tried calling and texting my dad to see when I could pop over for an uncomfortable but necessary discussion about Carly and her possible connection to the drive-by shooters—Erin agreed to ride go-carts on the little kid track so that Luke could putter around in his own car. Five other kids joined them on the track, all moving at no more than about ten miles per hour. They traversed the oval for four laps. Just as I pulled out my phone to see if the Boston team had any news to share, I heard an engine whirring. I looked up and found Luke’s yellow car jackknifed on top of a boulder that lined the inside part of the track. He was yelling at the top of his lungs as his sister circled him, laughing hysterically.

I couldn’t hear a word he said, but I had a feeling he was using plenty of four-letter words. The teenage employee was cracking up as he ran over and picked up the car and set it back down on the track. I tried to cover my smirking mouth.

A few minutes later, Luke was attempting to show me a bruise on his elbow as we got in the car. "I'm sorry, but I don't see anything."

"He's just faking it, Mother. Anything to get attention after he drove his go-cart right up that boulder." Erin practically spit on herself from laughing.

I could see steam coming out of his nostrils.

"We'll put some ice on it when we get back to Teresa's house. And Erin, your eye could use another bag of ice as well."

As we pulled into the driveway, I received a group text from Gretchen.

Got the goods on Carly - at least first wave - in attached file. Still waiting on other feedback. More later...

I sat in the car and read through the information as the kids went inside to dig around for a snack before dinner and hopefully put some ice on their respective bruises.

I thumbed through Gretchen's report. My first thought was that Carly had a lengthy rap sheet, although nothing violent. It started when she was just nineteen. Two convictions for forgery, marijuana drug possession twice, and then a period of four years with a clean sheet. Then she was convicted of cocaine drug possession twice over the next three years. I counted three more forgery convictions, the last one landing her in state prison for nine months in Huntsville. Another five years passed before she was again nabbed: two more cocaine convictions and...prostitution. She must have hit rock bottom as an addict.

I flipped to the next page and saw she had been given probation on her prostitution charge if she agreed to drug rehab. That was just six years ago. She had lived a hard life. Resting my hands in my lap, I glanced through the windshield at Teresa's white stucco house, her St. Augustine grass lush and green, and everything so meticulously cared for. She had worked her tail off to accomplish what she had, this oasis she shared with Corey when he was home from school. I'd bet she wouldn't have envisioned all this for herself twenty years ago, when she'd been knocked up by Suave Dave fresh out of high school.

The palm tree to my left swayed from the strong breeze as white clouds rippled against the blue sky. I could see a couple of brown leaves in the middle of the tree, and one dropped to the grass carpet. Like the rest of us, Teresa had dealt with her share of sadness. Well, it was more like her heart had been ripped out of her chest. Her daughter—Jess was what Corey had said her name was—died only a few years ago. I was so into my own world, I didn't even know she had another child. Jess had been Erin's age. Erin was a typical smartass, and sometimes lovable, teenage daughter. As irritating as she could be sometimes, I also saw her as perfect in some ways. I couldn't imagine loving her any more than I already did. Teresa hadn't seen her daughter grow up and experience these wonderful, albeit emotional transitions in life. I was reminded again of just how lucky I was. Later on tonight, once the kids were down and the wine was flowing, I'd approach the topic with

Teresa. Undoubtedly, tears would be shed, but I hoped I could bond a bit with her and promise to be there for her in the future.

I pulled myself out of the car and lifted my arms. I just felt gross from all the sweating at the putt-putt/go-cart place. I touched my nose and felt a decent sunburn. I'd pay for that later, but I sure had enjoyed watching my kids have fun—and experience a little tribulation along the way with the golf ball to Erin's face and the go-cart roll by Luke. Thankfully, they weren't seriously injured.

The second I put my hand on the brass handle of the front door, my phone buzzed. I was hoping for more data from Gretchen, or even Brad. Instead it was my dad returning my message from earlier.

You want to talk to us w/o the kids? You can come over in the next thirty minutes. We should be here.

He left his address, but didn't write "Love, Dad" or offer any other closing comment. Perhaps he knew that I would eventually uncover Carly's past. I could already feel a knot ping my gut in anticipation of our conversation. But it couldn't be avoided. This wasn't about exposing Carly. It was getting to the truth, hoping he could provide some insight as to why she might be targeted by a drug cartel or the thugs who represent them. Would she be part of the discussion, or would Dad protect her from his FBI daughter?

I responded to Dad with a quick "OK," shoved my phone back in my purse, and headed into the house. Just as I shut the front door behind me, I saw Corey standing there in nothing more than a white towel around his waist. Oh, and he was brushing his teeth too. His hair was a wet mop, and that provocative grin had returned.

"Do you mind wearing clothes when the kids are here?"

"Sure," he mumbled.

Corey had as much chest hair as any adult male—and he was just a kid! I couldn't fool my body. He was attractive...no, he was the kind of young stud you'd see in one of those fireman calendars where all they wear is a well-positioned hard hat. But he was still a kid to me.

I walked toward the entrance to the back hall; Corey ducked into the half-bath. I could hear him rinsing, then he called out, "By the way, I had no idea it was you. I thought I heard the doorbell. Must have been my music."

I tried not to turn my head to take another look at the eye candy, but I couldn't help it. My lady parts all worked perfectly fine, and it had been a long time since I'd been sent to the moon and back, so to speak. A look never hurt anyone.

"Shirt," I reminded him.

He pulled at his chest hair, and I rolled my eyes. "Okay, okay, I'll put on a shirt." He took one step down the hall that led to his bedroom, then pulled back and said, "I hope you don't have plans tonight...since I do. I thought Mom might be home to help out—I do need some razor blades, and we're out of Wheaties."

Still relies on Mommy to do all his shopping. Maybe she did his laundry too? Knowing Teresa, she probably had a maid who cleaned this place and did fun chores like Corey's laundry.

I replayed the first part of what he said to me. "Well, I do have to go out for a few minutes."

"No worries, the kids should be good here for a while."

I stopped moving and checked the starfish clock above the gargantuan flat screen. Archie was supposed to hook up with Cynthia, and I probably didn't have time to clean up.

"You sure you can't stick around for an hour or so?"

He looked up at the clock. "Shit no, I just realized I'm late picking up my date."

"Date?"

"Met a tourist on the dock today. Real nice, loves the ocean and all the creatures in it. I think we have a few things in common."

I gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Okay, how old is she?"

"She didn't say, but she talked about her six-year-old daughter. I'm guessing she's about thirty, maybe thirty-one."

"And the daughter doesn't scare you away?"

I wondered if I had asked that question on behalf of Brad, even though he had never shown any hesitation about my kids.

"We're just going on a date, not walking down the aisle. Eventually, I wouldn't mind kids...once I grow up some more, experience more about life. I want to travel, learn about other cultures. You know what they say, YOLO."

"YOLO," I repeated, my mind temporarily unable to break it down.

"You only live once, Alexandra." He flashed his smile and ripped the towel off his lower body just as he turned down the hall.

For a split second, my breath caught in my throat. I'd seen a streak of his right cheek. It was white and well defined. That damn kid.

I'd forgotten how many cars could be crammed on Highway 100 during evening drive time. I became quickly frustrated with the lack of urgency and organization on the highway. Ahead of me, a truck had steam pouring out of its hood, its owner standing there waving a handkerchief. I turned up the AC, then flipped on the radio, trying to calm my nerves. Lots of commercials for used cars.

For some odd reason, the quick snapshot of Corey's ass had taken me down memory lane—my time with Mario. I realized that was an odd leap to make. Mario didn't have a white ass, but their body types were similar. Maybe that was why my head went in that direction. In the past, recalling old times with Mario had always brought a smile to my face. But after seeing him cavorting with a man whose moniker was Powder Man, the positive memories were almost overshadowed by dark possibilities.

He had been such a caring, compassionate person. He had one of those souls that calmed me, as if he were actually about ten years older than the rest of us in high school. How the same Mario I knew could be part of an operation that hooked kids and adults alike on drugs was unimaginable. And with the associated violence and killing in his native Mexico, along with it spilling into the border towns of the US, I didn't see how he could live with himself.

I finally found a station that diverted my attention from the bittersweet thoughts of Mario, as well as my upcoming conversation with my dad. I tapped my hands on the steering wheel to the beat of a fast-paced song from Maroon 5 called "Sugar." But when I turned off the ignition and walked up the sidewalk, I could feel my hands turn warm and clammy.

"Hey," Dad said without making eye contact as he opened the door. He had one hand in his front pocket. I took another quick gander of the neighborhood—not elite, like Teresa's, but it was upper middle class. Dad's financial and personal turnaround had been nothing short of miraculous. Just a few months ago, he was bouncing from home to home. When I met him for lunch in DC, he'd smelled like booze. I studied his face as I walked into the foyer. His sagging cheeks had a pink tone. He seemed outright pissed.

"Dad, I think we need to go somewhere and talk...privately."

He pressed his lips together and extended his arm toward the living room. I took three timid steps and found Carly huddled on the edge of a rattan sofa with palm-tree-print cushions. I couldn't help but notice the glass on the round coffee table sat on top of about a thousand chipped seashells, all types and colors.

Carly was looking down, her hands grasping a tumbler of something amber. I wondered if it was brandy or whiskey—the last thing she needed and the last temptation Dad needed.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Carly lifted her red-rimmed eyes. She'd been crying.

"Only if you have something like water or a soft drink."

She shook her head once and smirked. "You think this is booze, don't you?"

She was on the offensive.

"I never said that."

"I can see it in your face. Do you think I would do that to your father? I know his past, what he's been through. This is cider. I made it myself." She tipped back her head and took in a mouthful. "It's actually quite good. Can I get you some?" Her mood had improved in just a couple of seconds.

What better way to ensure she was telling the truth. "Sure, that would be nice."

Dad turned around, crossed his arms, and stared at the backyard while Carly went to the kitchen. She returned a minute later and set my glass on a coaster with the emblem of the US Coast Guard on it.

Carly patted the seat next to her on the couch. “Donald.” When he didn’t respond, she tried turning around, but stopped halfway and reached for her neck. “You know my neck won’t let me turn that far. Come join us. I know we need to have a family discussion.”

My mouth suddenly felt dry, and I reached for my drink. Family discussion. Since when did she become part of my family?

The cider wasn’t half bad.

“How do you like it?” she asked, curling a loose strand of brunette hair around her ear that had at least four piercings. I wondered where else she had piercings.

My brooding father shuffled in our direction and sat next to Carly.

“This is good. How did you make it?” I asked.

“Old family recipe.”

“Do you have family in the area?”

“I moved here in my late teens. Originally from Sacramento. I still have a couple of siblings who live in California. Both my parents died a few years back.”

A tear bubbled in her eye so quickly I thought it had fallen from the ceiling. She wiped it away. I could sense a lot of emotion in the room, from both her and my dad.

“Well, let’s get it over with,” Dad, said, finally speaking. His arms were still crossed.

I licked my dry lips, prepared to open the conversation. I paused and swallowed more cider.

“I knew you’d like it,” Carly said with a wink.

I got the sense she was trying to influence my sentiment toward her. I just nodded, then said, “I don’t mean to put you in an awkward—”

“You just couldn’t let your daddy be happy? I knew you’d turn on that FBI sixth sense and not stop.”

A rush of heat invaded my neck. “Dad, FBI or not, I don’t want to see you get hurt, physically or otherwise.”

He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

I reached for my purse and dug until I found my phone.

Carly set her glass down and huffed out a tired breath. “A woman can only leave her past behind if others around her allow her to do it.”

She locked eyes with me, as if she was pleading for me not to go any further.

I chose not to respond.

“You can put that phone away. I’ll admit my past,” she said.

I palmed the phone in my lap, waiting for her to continue. I shifted my eyes over to my dad, who was staring down at the table as if he were intrigued by one of the seashells. I knew he wasn’t.

Carly tipped back her head and swallowed more cider, her eyes rolling back slightly in her head. She finished by wiping her mouth with her arm. I

begin to question if that was indeed cider.

“You’re going to actually make me do it?” she sighed, her arms splayed. She nearly knocked my dad in the head with her empty glass. He took it from her hand and set it on the table, without a coaster.

I swiped my thumb across the phone screen and found the file I had reviewed earlier. I then held the phone up. “So, Dad, you’re aware of all the forgery and drug convictions?”

He nodded. “Alex, I know everything. She told me everything.”

I considered the impact of mentioning her other conviction.

“Just to ensure I feel two inches high, I’ll say the words. I was a prostitute. A whore.” Carly’s eyes narrowed into tiny little slits.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you or bring up any type of demons.”

“Well, you’re not succeeding,” she said as tears practically shot out of her eyes.

“You happy now?” Dad pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to Carly, then rubbed her leg.

“Dad...” I paused for a second, giving Carly a moment to gather herself.

A few seconds later, Dad leaned his elbows on his knees. “Is that all you came for?”

I knew I couldn’t leave without showing the video and asking the real question. “I need to show you something.”

I looked down at my screen and found the video file and tapped it twice, then I held up the video for Dad and Carly to see. Their eyes didn’t blink.

“You want to show us people getting shot and killed? I know you’re with the FBI and all, but that’s a little twisted, isn’t it, Alex?”

“Just wait a moment, Dad.”

I’d seen the video a dozen times, maybe more, but as the footage played out, I could once again feel the terror of everyone at the scene. The screams, the shaking camera, the quivering voices, and people crumpling to the ground after being shot.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dad wiping his palms on his shorts. Maybe he felt the same way I did—uncomfortable with reliving the scene. And maybe he’d be just as shocked as I was to see one of the shooters targeting Carly.

A moment later, the unmasked shooter appeared on the screen, his finger on the trigger, spraying bullets out of his semi-automatic rifle. The knuckles on my hand holding the phone looked like white caps. I tried to keep the phone steady as I took in this viewpoint of the shooting and thought of the view from where I had been kneeling when he turned down our aisle.

Right there! That was when he turned his focus to Carly curled up on the ground. I gazed at both Carly and Dad. He continued rubbing his hands on his shorts, and Carly just sat there void of emotion or any type of expression.

“Did you just see that?”

I pressed pause, and the screen froze just after Archie had shot the armed

man, who then reached for his bloodied shoulder and began to fall backward.

"It's god-awful," Dad said, shaking his head. "Never want anyone in my family to experience that again."

Carly erupted from her trance. "I hope the authorities hunt down these bastards and shoot them dead without asking a single question. That's all they deserve," she said, stabbing her finger at the screen, her voice animated, her back perfectly erect.

My dad reached up and rubbed the back of her neck. Her spine became less rigid, and she slowly retreated from her aggressive position and settled into my dad's arms. But her eyes never left mine. I couldn't determine what she was communicating to me. Defiance against me or law enforcement? Her desire for retribution against the assailants? Or was there something deeper?

"I understand your revulsion in watching these men terrorize everyone, you guys included. But you must have seen that man brazenly walk up and... hold on, let me show it again."

"Alex, we don't need to see it again. We lived it, and we'll both have nightmares for the next year because of it," Dad said, holding up a hand and shaking his head.

"Dad..." I could feel a swell of emotion rising through my chest. I was pissed and upset. But I knew that losing control right now would derail the intent of my discussion.

I released a full breath until my lungs emptied, then made another attempt. "I'm going to play this one more time. I'd like your feedback."

Carly said, "This is our damn house, and we're letting her dictate what we watch and don't watch?"

With my eyes on the phone, I slid the video back about twenty seconds and withheld the urge to snap back at Carly. Dad didn't respond to her comment either, so I hit play and let the scene play out.

"Get ready for it," I said, hovering my finger near the screen. "There! Did you see that?" I tried like hell to avoid stating what I wanted them to admit to seeing.

"What? What am I looking at other than your buddy Archie shooting that son of a bitch? I just wish he had better aim and the bullet had put a hole between his eyes."

"Hell yes, Donny." Carly reached up and gave my dad a high-five.

Did that just happen? I squeezed my eyes shut, wondering if the maturity level of these two had dipped to that of a fourteen-year-old boy playing one of those violent video games.

"Are you guys for real?"

"Why, that's no way to talk to your father." Carly tried pushing off Dad to sit up...as if she were challenging me.

I forced myself to count to three as I bit into my cheek.

"The video. I guess I'll have to spoon-feed you. Did you not see clearly that the man was targeting Carly?"

She gasped, and my dad scratched his scruff. I could see his hand trembling.

"I'm waiting for a response. This is serious shit."

"I can't give you a response for something that didn't happen," Dad said.

I tried to rein in my breathing cadence. "Do you need your glasses, Dad?"

"I could see that screen perfectly fine. But what I'm seeing isn't the issue. It's what I'm hearing out of your mouth. You're insinuating something. What exactly?"

"I was hoping that, as adults, you would open up and tell me. I guess I'll have to spell it out for you. Carly was targeted by a bunch of thugs most likely tied to a drug gang or cartel. The question is why? What is she mixed up in now?"

Carly propelled herself off my dad's chest, moving to within a couple feet of my face.

"I have never in my life been treated like such trash, even in my darkest days. This is reprehensible." Her face turned beet red as she turned back to Dad. "And, I say again, she's doing this in our house."

As sure as the strong southerly winds whipping across South Padre Island, I knew Carly was desperately trying to deflect the focus of this conversation. She'd yet to discuss the actual point I was trying to make. I felt like I was watching a street corner bait and switch game. The only question was...would dad buy any of it?

He looked at both of the women in his life. His lips parted for a split second, then he momentarily turned his gaze back to the colorful coffee table.

"This is wrong, all this bickering over such a tragic event. I don't want to see us fighting. I've come too far." He rested his hand on Carly's leg. "*We've* come so far. Alex, you've got to know that Carly and I have bonded like I've never bonded with another woman. And I realize it's at least partially due to what we've both suffered through. Addiction is debilitating and depressing. And to find someone who's willing to help prop you up when you most need it, who understands that unbelievable urge to want the very thing you shouldn't have, is priceless. You should know that we never completely lose the desire to escape the world around us; we either just cover it up real well, or we have moments where we forget about it. Anyway, I just wanted you to know what Carly means to me."

"And Donny means the same to me."

Again with the 'Donny'? Before this trip, the only time I recalled hearing that name was when one of Dad's old Coast Guard buddies dropped by our house in Virginia, before Mom died.

Carly thumbed an escaping tear as she looked at my dad.

"I don't mean to upset you. I admire your recovery," I said to Dad, then I shifted to Carly. "Both of you. It's great to see."

"Good to hear, Alex. I thought there was goodness in you," she said.

"But..." Their approving smiles quickly evaporated. "Carly, you still

haven't said a word about the video. I'm only here because I'm concerned. If you are the focus of a gang of thugs, we need to get you into protective custody. And we need to understand why. I don't want to see anything happen to you, but there are others who could be in danger—Dad, the kids, my friends, and yes, even Archie.”

Carly curled her bottom lip and flexed her jaw. “Being an employee of the FBI doesn't give you some type of super power to read people's minds or, for that matter, to dictate how we run our lives. I'll say this just once: I am not affiliated with any type of drug gang or cartel. Yes, I used drugs for a period of my life. They destroyed every relationship I ever had. I lost forty pounds, couldn't keep food down, my organs were starting to shut down. It was agonizing. I literally wondered if I was going to die in my sleep. I've been to hell and back, sister, and there's no way I'm ever going back.”

I took in a breath, and wondered if there was any degree of truth to what she was saying. Not about her addiction and subsequent recovery, but her claim to having no connection to the drug world. She looked healthy enough. She had decent skin tone and only a few wrinkles, so maybe she had led a clean, sober existence recently. Dad could have been at least partially responsible for that—and maybe she had helped him, too, as he'd indicated. But I kept going back to thinking why she was purposely trying to deflect the focus of the conversation. And, more to the point, why were both she and Dad acting like they had just walked outside and pretended the sun didn't exist? That was the equivalent of denying that the gang member was targeting Carly. Unless there was the off chance, the one-percent chance, that my perspective of the situation was skewed somehow.

“Okay,” was all I could think of saying. I lifted to my feet. “I need to get back to the kids.” I grabbed my purse and started walking to the door. Still simmering from our discussion, blood flooded my veins so fast my balance felt off. As I reached the entrance to the dining room, I had to put a hand on the wall to steady myself for a moment.

Is that a gun?

I rubbed my eyes just as Dad gently put his hand on my shoulder. “Dear, I know this whole episode has been upsetting for you. It has been for us too.”

He guided me to the door, and I resisted the urge to flip my head around to verify what I'd just seen: a 9mm pistol resting on the dining room table.

Why would Dad have his gun out?

“Yeah,” I said from the door, the wall now cutting off my view into the dining room.

Again, before I could get my mental bearings and understand fact versus fiction, what I should push versus what I should let go, Dad took me into his arms and hugged me. I couldn't remember the last time he had done that. And I didn't think that was because I'd suffered from amnesia a few months back.

“Families aren't always going to see the world the same way,” Dad said, gripping my shoulders while looking into my eyes. It was a déjà vu moment,

harking back to my days as a teen. The words were different, but it seemed like he was talking down to me, relegating me to a status that wasn't on par with him or his logical assessment of the big, bad world.

"Okay."

"But just know that I forgive you, Alex. We'll put this behind us and move on. We're blood, always will be. And when you're blood, you don't ever turn your back on those you love. It's as constant as the waves crashing against the shoreline."

He pulled me closer for another quick hug, and my eyes caught a glimpse of Carly standing in the living room. She had her hand near her mouth, but I could swear she was wearing a smirk visible from the moon. The second I steadied my sights, Dad let me go, and I lifted my eyes to his.

A moment later I was outside, my purse swaying at my side, the salty, thick air brushing my hair in my face. I didn't bother corralling the loose strands. I just walked slowly to my car, taking in deep breaths, hoping my tangled mind would soon unwind and allow me to see the truth through the fog of...manipulation. That was how I felt. I'd been manipulated by my own father.

And as I let it resonate, it didn't surprise me one single bit.

The first pop jarred Kyle Spencer awake, redlining his pulse for a quick moment. The top of the casket had been nailed shut, but not as well as before. One side had a crack in it, enough for his vision to cut across the room. He was in the same place, cream walls with pictures of crosses. The Gomez Crematorium and Funeral Home. He didn't see any set of legs, like he had just before he dozed off. The popping noise had a bit of an echo to it, and it sounded like someone had pulled the tab on a can of beer in a nearby room.

Or was it something entirely different? His body went stiff, and he brought his hands up and palmed the casket, his attention on high alert.

Pop, pop, pop.

Gunshots! Someone was firing a gun. This set of three sounded more like a crackle. He gasped, then choked on his sandpaper tongue, struggling to swallow. Part of him wanted to cry out, hoping a SWAT team had been sent in to rescue him and would soon swoop into the room and finally free him.

Voices, mostly in Spanish, shouted down a hallway. Hard-soled shoes tapped furiously against tile floors. He held his breath, gauging the direction of the sounds. Suddenly he heard someone stumble into his room. He could see legs through the crack in his coffin. Two sets, one wearing old shorts—that appeared to be Wild Hair—the other belonging to the older man, who had on beige cashmere slacks.

“What do we do with our prize hog?” Wild Hair asked.

Kyle could hear ammo being slapped into a pistol.

“He’s safest down here, underground. We can’t let those crazy men find him. CR would have our asses if we let something happen to this cash cow. Upstairs now!”

They ran off. It didn't seem like they were talking about law enforcement of any kind. But who could it be? A wave of emotion made his skin tingle. A moment ago, he thought the cavalry had surrounded the building and his insufferable torture would finally cease. But now he wasn't going to be rescued by anyone, or so it seemed.

A thought slammed into his mind like the electrical jolt that had pierced his body days ago. He had to save himself. And he couldn't wait until they gave him food and water, nursed him back to health. While they had mentioned the possibility of saving his life in the hope they could garner a handsome ransom, did he actually believe that after his mom and dad forked over a hundred grand, or one million, or even ten million, they would let him go? He'd seen too many faces. With his information, authorities would be able to hunt down these animals and throw them in jail for the rest of their lives.

It was now or never. Summoning every ounce of strength he could muster, he pressed against the lid of the coffin. He pressed until his arms shook, until the veins in his neck might burst from the extreme pressure. He dropped his arms as beads of sweat bubbled at the end of his nose. His chest lifted with every labored breath, cracking open scabs from his burn wounds. This wasn't working. He wasn't fucking Superman.

Pop, pop, pop, pop.

Four more gun shots and a splintering crash. Sounded like a large window rupturing into a million pieces. Who the hell could be shooting up a funeral home? What were they after? Him? Or was it just some type of statement being made by a rival group? He was almost certain that this new group wouldn't just let him walk away without something in return. He apparently was a commodity, the value of which, he guessed, was in the eye of the beholder. They might think he was far more valuable as a drug runner, and they would stuff him like a piñata, full of drugs to move across the border.

Who the fuck knew?

He just knew he had been going about this escape attempt all wrong. He was willing to sacrifice anything to get out of this coffin and away from the funeral home. He scooted his body to the side of the crack, then pressed the heel of his palm up against the edge that was cracked the most. He lowered his arm slowly, then channeled all of his energy into a quick thrust of his palm against the plywood. It landed with a dull thud, but the damn board didn't budge. Not even a hair. He repeated the same routine, and again the board remained intact. He went at it seven, eight, nine times. Nothing.

In between panting gasps, he wiped sweat from his eyes and noticed his hand bloodied. He felt splinters jutting out as if he'd just smacked a cactus. Fuck it. He didn't care if his hand was split in two, he would do anything to find freedom. To live.

Kyle wedged the tips of his fingers into the crack. He could feel splinters burrowing under his fingernails, the pain agonizing. But it didn't compare to when they'd tortured him, and this task wasn't just for the sheer enjoyment of a bunch of perverted pricks. This task had a purpose.

He screamed out as he jabbed his fingers farther into the crack. "Just a little...bit...more," he grunted out. He couldn't recognize his own voice. It had been damaged by screaming when he was being electrocuted and having very little water since then.

Kyle finally felt the edge of the board. He rammed his elbow, hoping his hand would separate the nails just a tad. He went after it with everything he had, pounding his elbow, thrusting his weight into it. *There*—his first knuckle felt the frayed edge of the lid. He'd made progress, and a new dose of adrenaline coursed through his veins.

Without knowing how much longer he had until the room was invaded by his captors or this second group of unknown, gun-toting assailants, he went spastic—wiggling, wedging, prying with his fingers and hand. A second

knuckle now touched the edge of the lid. He could, more or less, grab it. He didn't wait for another burst of energy; he simply changed the angle of his focus. He hammered his elbow, while at the same time thrusting his arm and his entire body upward in that one spot. The nails squealed like a pig that had just been castrated. And it was a joyous feeling. He continued, and the next two thrusts brought two more squeals. He felt a rush of air invade his space. He was close.

More crackling pops echoed in the distance, and he banged and battered his hand against the lid until a nail popped out. With one of the corners now about six inches higher, he raised his knees to his chest. He hadn't been able to stretch in days. Was this what it felt like to be a hundred years old?

He growled as he shoved his legs upward. More nail squeals from the far corner, and the lid opened another three inches. He did it twice more, and the lid lifted another four or five inches. He turned onto his side, then onto his stomach, and pressed his back against the lid, moving his knees underneath him. Biting down as hard as he could, he propelled his body upward. The board cracked, and he popped up from the coffin as jagged spears of wood punctured his side.

He moved to a standing position, and even with rubbery legs and blood soaking through his soiled T-shirt, he raised his fists as high as they could go and pumped them into the air. "Yes!" he exclaimed.

He took a single breath and swung his sights around, looking for an obvious way out. Two wooden boxes just like his were upright, leaning against a far wall. *They must be empty.* There was a sign on a black metal door that read "Crematorium." Stepping out of the box—his undesirable home for the last week—he knew his escape had just begun. His physical condition was probably equal to that of a combat victim, or an elderly person who had just finished surgery on about ten different parts of the body. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a door in the corner. He tried to run, but it wasn't happening. He shuffled his feet and torqued his body to make it to the door, grabbing walls and beams along the way so he wouldn't tumble to the floor. Just before the door, there was another coffin. The lid was ajar, and he kicked it off and peered inside. It was stuffed with black bricks of something wrapped in plastic. It had to be drugs. Cocaine most likely. The old Kyle would have been ballsy enough to snatch a brick and take it with him, hoping he could make some extra cash and even have some left over to throw a raging party.

There wasn't enough money on the planet for him to steal one of those coke bricks now. He wanted no part of it—the lifestyle, the partying, and especially the violence. For all these years, he had separated the violence and killing he'd heard about along the border from the weed he smoked and cocaine he'd snorted—the drugs he'd also pushed others to use. But now he knew better. And he prayed like hell that one day he'd be able to educate other young people about the ramifications of their actions, the feeding frenzy that ultimately started because they just wanted to party without any

restrictions.

Kyle put his hand on the metal handle of the door and pushed down. It opened, and he felt instant relief. In front of him was a long hallway with bare walls and another door at the end. He shot a quick glimpse over his shoulder and listened for a moment. The room was still empty—outside of whatever or whoever was inside the wooden coffins. He could just make out the hollow echo of distant voices, mostly shouting. Had the shootout ended, maybe by the police? He couldn't wait and hope for law enforcement to arrive and rescue him. Everything else had gone wrong up to this point in this nightmarish fiasco, so there was no way he could rely on the good guys to waltz in and save his ass.

The hinged door clanged shut behind him, and he set his sights on the end of the hall where he spotted a white metal door. He took six steps and glanced upward as he leaned against the wall, his chest pumping out air. It seemed like someone had moved the end of the hallway back another ten feet. He pinched the corners of his eyes and realized his bearings had probably gone to shit. As he pushed off the wall, he noticed he left a trail of blood down the hallway and a smear of blood along the wall. The finger he'd use to pry open the coffin lid was a bloody mess, and while still raw and throbbing, his quest for liberation had blocked out most of the pain.

A few more steps and already he could feel the adrenaline drain from his body as if someone had accidentally pulled the stopper on his energy storage. He grunted in response and pushed ahead, moving as fast as he could will his body toward that door. His muscles sputtered like a forty-year-old car taken out of the demolition pile. A burning sensation shot down his back into his hamstring, limiting his stride to about six inches. His feet plodded along, smacking the gray linoleum floor as if he wore limp fins. Reaching down, he ran his hand along his left calf; it felt like a baseball had been transplanted into his leg.

Looking toward the door, he could feel a swell of emotion. His dwindling energy had allowed the pain to emerge from the shadows of his conscience. A battle of agony between his beaten face, the dozens of points on his body where his skin had been burned, the spider bites, and the lasting impact of being stuffed in a coffin with no way to move or stretch. He released a jittery breath and pressed on, but his pace had slowed. He glanced over his shoulder momentarily, hoping Wild Hair or one of the other thugs wouldn't burst through, ready to punish him for trying to escape.

As he turned back around, he noticed a tinted glass bubble above his head. A camera? He felt his stomach drop. Were they watching him right now, possibly making fun of every step he took, just waiting for him to get to the end of the hall before they cut him off?

His anxiety kicked up a notch, but he had no other options. He had to keep moving in the same direction. Turning back now was akin to putting a gun to his head—just like his captors had done to him days before. He'd

rather die than go back and subject himself to more torture.

He purposely pinched a thumbnail into his damaged finger, using the jabbing prick to center his focus on one goal—reaching the far door. He grunted as he pushed himself to pick up the pace. Even with his mini steps, he could hear the quicker cadence of his feet smacking the floor, and somehow, that infused his body with more energy.

“Come on, Kyle. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. Keep moving,” he said in rhythm to each step.

Ten feet.

Part of him just wanted to dive at the door, but falling to the floor would only damage his chances at true freedom. If he fell, he wasn’t sure he’d have the strength or the balance to get back to his feet.

Two more steps....and he lunged at the door handle. It rotated ninety degrees, but his momentum didn’t budge the door. Was it locked on the other side? Maybe it was barricaded. He took a step back and tried to look under the door, but the small crack of space that existed didn’t show any light.

Then it hit him. Was there any guarantee that once he opened this door, he would be outside...in a safe place, finally free? Who knew what was on the other side of the door?

His overworked ticker made a last stand, thumping his ribcage faster and faster, as if it were telling him to take an alternate path. His body, his soul had been held over a fire. That was why his natural response was to run from the unknown. He looked behind him at the droplets of crimson and thought about the life he’d known the last week. That fear was far greater than any fear of the unexpected.

He lunged at the door with everything he had and it burst open, slamming against something hard. He fell to the floor, wincing as his shoulder pounded against cold concrete. He opened his eyes and saw a concrete step, and then another and another. He looked up and saw at least two flights of stairs with a black handrail. Three small pipes lined the wall. Slowly turning over, he felt his shoulder pop.

“Fuck!” He gripped his shoulder while ignoring the fact that his yelling could be drawing the enemy to his position. A pause between breaths, and he picked up a slight buzzing sound. He turned his head and saw four red letters. Four glorious letters that literally brought a smile to his face: E-X-I-T.

Even with his shoulder separated and his back feeling like crushed pretzels, he somehow pushed himself upright and aimed his hands for the exit door handle. It popped open and he took in a clean dose of air. It was dark and humid, but it was clean air. He arched his neck, closed his eyes, and filled his lungs as if he were drinking from a fountain of oxygen.

He opened his eyes and steadied his balance against a wall. It was made of stucco, with prickly edges shooting out from the façade. He saw a small gray and black sign hanging just above his head, acknowledging the building as the funeral home. He pushed himself off the wall and wiped his hand on his

shirt. He was done with that hellhole.

He was standing in an alley, only a few lights illuminating the path in front and behind him. He needed water, desperately. And he knew he had to get to a hospital. And the police. But where was he? The funeral home sign was in English, as was another sign just up ahead, although his eyes couldn't make out exactly what it said. He was probably still in the States. He trudged forward, knowing his freedom would be short-lived if he thought a car would simply drive up and take him around town. Keeping his eyes on the alley coated with black grime, he made sure his bare feet stayed clear of metal cans and pieces of glass. His feet were dirty and disgusting, as was the rest of his body. His own body odor smelled worse than the garbage sticking out of the upcoming dumpster. He almost chuckled at his own filth. What would Mom say?

More important to his current survival, what would any locals think of him? Homeless for certain, and one scary sight. It might take some convincing for any normal citizen to take him seriously. He shuffled another hundred feet or more. He veered to the right side of the path, where a metal bar now blocked his vision of the sign he'd seen earlier. No worries, just a few more steps...

"Fuck!" Broken glass impaled the ball of his foot, and he crumpled to the pavement and squeezed his foot with both hands. He was so close to finding a real human, someone to hopefully aid him with water, food, and access to care and the police.

Just then, a door pushed open, and a woman came out holding a bag of trash.

"Oh, dear God, what are you doing on the ground, son?"

She was older—sixty, maybe more—with curly, gray hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. Round, metal-frame glasses matched the color of her hair and her eyes.

"I stepped on a piece of glass. Will you help me?" He peered up at her and hoped she wouldn't be scared off.

"Are you one of those guys who can't get a job and just begs us hardworking folks?"

"I'm just a college student. I—"

"College? I guess you do look a little bit younger. Hold on." She walked across the alley and swung the bag of trash into the open dumpster. On her way back, she kneeled next to him, first eyeing his foot. "Let me take a look."

He flipped it over, and blood gushed out of the open wound.

"That's an ugly one. We need to get that piece of glass out."

"I need a doctor, actually an entire hospital for all the wounds I've got."

"I was a nurse for thirty-two years, working ER for most of it. I've done just about everything. By the looks of it, I'm sure I can remove that glass, patch you up. By the way, if you're in college, then why do you look like you just hiked across the desert?"

He squinted and pointed down the alley. "I've been held hostage at the funeral home."

He turned back around, and her eyes were staring at his jittery arm.

Breaking from her momentary trance, she moved to a hunched position and grabbed under his arm. "Come on now. Let's get you inside and take care of you."

He was surprised by the grip of her hands as she pulled him up so he could hobble on one foot. "Did you hear me? I was held hostage in that building by a bunch of crazy people. They had me in a coffin. They took turns torturing me over the last several days."

She had already wrapped his arm around her shoulder and helped move him a few steps toward her back door. She reached for the knob and pulled it open, using her foot to kick it wider.

He spoke louder. "Are you hard of hearing?"

"It's okay, kid. I've got you, and nothing is going to happen to you. I'll take care of everything."

Just inside the door, the woman paused at a sink and opened the spigot into a tall cup and handed him the water. He downed the entire cup in just a few seconds, then asked for more. As she poured him another cup, he noticed blood from his foot drizzling onto her beige entry rug.

"Oh no, I ruined your rug. I'm so sorry. I really think you should call a paramedic and get me to a hospital," he said as she handed him a fresh cup of water. He didn't waste time, gulping it all down, a good portion of it dripping down his scruffy chin.

"Oh God, that tastes incredible."

She pulled a dark towel out of a cabinet, leaned down, and wrapped his foot. Then she moved back into position and hoisted a good portion of his weight onto her shoulder. "We'll put you up temporarily in my guest bedroom down this hallway." They headed in that direction.

"But what about those assholes who held me hostage?"

"Aunt Kitty will take care of everything." She helped him down the hall and into a room with a red chaise lounge, a four-post bed, and a patchwork quilt hanging over a rod on the wall.

He sat on the soft cushion of the chaise and released an exhausted breath.

She motored out of the room and came back seconds later with two plastic containers that had the words "Medical Supplies" written in red ink on their lids. "Yes sir, Aunt Kitty will take care of everything," she said, opening the first container and fishing multiple packages of gauze pads, disinfectant, and a pair of tweezers.

Losing the desire to even open his mouth, he sat back, closed his eyes, and decided to trust the first normal, caring person he'd seen in days. Aunt Kitty would take care of him.

The sand crab's tiny legs fluttered across the wet sand just as Luke had finally calmed down and begun to listen to his grandfather's story.

"Quick, Erin, let's get him!"

I kept the cone of light on the crab with my miniature spotlight as the kids darted around an unsuspecting couple holding hands, undoubtedly hoping to take a relaxing walk down the South Padre shoreline at almost ten o'clock at night.

"Sorry," I yelled behind me just as Luke cut through shallow water next to a lady wearing a white summer dress. I couldn't see much, but based on her expression I think he'd just coated her with a splattering of sandy mud.

He giggled as he ran by me, tripping up his sister in pursuit of the little critter.

"Erin, you okay?"

She picked herself up, and realizing her grandfather and his girlfriend were nearby, she decided to slap the sand off her legs and arms and downplay the situation—a rare occasion in our family.

I watched Luke close in on the shifty sand crab. Just as my determined son lunged, the crab disappeared into a hole, and Luke's knees plunged into a mound of dry sand. Apparently, some of it sprayed into his mouth. He began to spit and paw at his mouth.

"Oh, sweetie, that will just make it worse," Carly said, rushing to his side. "Here, use my bottled water." He held out his hands and tongue, and she soaked him down.

"Thanks," he said, brushing himself off. Just before he hopped over to Dad, he said to Carly, "You're pretty cool." She lit up and then glanced at me. Did she just arch a brow? *Oh hell no.*

I turned back around and led the brigade down the beach, again wondering if my perspective of Carly and everything about her was influenced by something...maybe even my mom from many years ago. I glanced out at the dark ocean and saw a few lights blinking. Those were typically huge ships carrying oil. As I tried to drown out the voices behind me, I had a quick *déjà vu* moment—Mario and me skipping down the beach as teenagers, about this same time of night, kicking water at each other until one of us fell. That would lead to a bout of uncontrollable laughter and maybe a quick kiss.

"You see, son, there are times when it doesn't matter about the technology or the fancy equipment, it just comes down to..."

Under my breath, I joined him in saying "the fight in the dog." I rolled my eyes, not because I'd heard this same story a thousand times, even if it was a time when my father was truly a hero. I was rolling my eyes because he was

here, with us, my core family. It seemed out of place after the emotional exchange earlier. The feeling of manipulation hadn't subsided; it had only been covered up by some authentic exchanges with Erin and Luke.

It was interesting how my dad and Carly had come to be there. The kids and I had arrived at the beach for a late-evening stroll in the low tide, when all of a sudden, Dad and Carly appeared. Luke hadn't been able to hide his grin. "Grampy and I were trading text messages. I thought it would be cool to see them again. I wanted to hear the whole story of how he got that medal."

"How much is this sucker worth?" Luke brought me back to the present.

"It's priceless, Luke. Money doesn't buy this kind of honor," my dad said.

"I'm just wondering, since it is solid gold. What do you call this again, Grampy?"

"The Gold Lifesaving Medal. Dating back to 1874, this is one of the oldest decorations awarded in the United States."

"Sorry," Erin said suddenly interested, "but why did you get this?"

Oh my, did I have to hear it again?

"To make it short, Erin, a fifty-foot sea vessel crashed into some rocks in stormy seas off the coast of Virginia. As a trained rescue swimmer, I boarded a Coast Guard MH-65 Dolphin helicopter and we flew sixty miles due east. We knew from the radio reports that four crewman had abandoned ship and were trying to get to the life rafts. I was lowered from the helicopter, fully expecting a grab-and-go mission."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Where I would secure a person with a harness to my pulley, and then they would raise us back into the helicopter."

"So what happened?"

"We had a malfunction. The cable wouldn't retreat. So I dove into the water, swam through five-foot swells to the man who appeared to have the most trouble staying afloat, and then swam three hundred yards to the shore of a small rock island. I then went back out to sea and repeated that process three more times."

"Holy crap, Grampy. You were like Aquaman and James Bond wrapped up in one."

He chuckled so loudly I couldn't help but turn around and watch him teeter backward, his hand over his belly. He popped it a couple of times. "I was in damn good shape in my twenties. Not so much these days."

Carly nuzzled her face against his arm. "I can't complain."

"Oh brother," I said under my breath.

We approached a larger crowd of folks admiring a jellyfish that had washed up on shore. As I led our group around the people, I could hear a recognizable voice calling out above the murmur. I stopped and peered into the cluster.

"Has anyone seen a blond-haired woman with two kids? Her name is Alex."

I couldn't see the afro, or much else in the darkened conditions, but I could certainly make out Archie's voice.

From somewhere in the middle of the group of people, he continued. "She's kind of yay big, a little hot if she has her shit together, and she doesn't wear her wedding ring from her dead husband."

That guy could get my blood pressure rising like no one else. I couldn't run away fast enough, not with the kids and parents in tow. "Archie!"

About ten heads turned my direction. One older lady laid a hand on my arm. "Are you this Alex person?"

Before I could respond, a man broke through the crowd, tripped, and fell at our feet. Now I could see his afro.

"Archie, what the hell are you doing?"

"No cussing, Mom, right?" Erin said from behind me.

I ignored Erin's comment and helped him up, trying to minimize our distraction to others. I just nodded at the woman and jerked Archie forward so our family could continue our so-called leisurely stroll. "What's wrong with you?" I shined the flashlight directly into his eyes.

"I can't see now," he said, blinking his eyes and losing his balance.

I moved the beam down to the sand in front of us. "That better?"

"I'm only seeing tiny, red spots. Give me a moment."

He leaned to the side and started shaking his head violently in one direction.

"What are you doing now?"

"Think I have sand in my ear."

"You only do that when you have water stuck in your ear. Stop doing that. People think you're weird."

He raised back up. "Okay, I guess I'll have to live with fifty-percent hearing in one ear."

I tried to ignore his drama. "How did you find me? *Why* did you find me?"

He splayed his arms while angling his frame in front of me, just to make sure I didn't miss his pissy expression. "It's the twenty-first century, Alex, and we're in the middle of this case and you're not checking your phone."

I reached for my pocket, and I only felt the keys to the rental car.

"Ah, sorry," I said, turning my head. "Erin, I need my phone."

While she appeared to be listening to more of Dad's epic rescue story, she also had one eye on my phone, where her thumbs were moving at supersonic speed.

"Can you stop texting for a moment and give me my phone back please?"

She sighed. "One sec..." she said as if I were inconveniencing her.

She must have been advising the president on some type of foreign policy. Now she appeared to be speaking into the phone.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Can't say exactly..."

"Why not?"

“I’m on a Skype session, and we have about ten or fifteen people connected to talk about the latest episode of *Teen Wolf*.”

“What? We have a data plan, young lady. Turn off the phone.”

“Ugh. Okay.”

“Erin.”

“One more quick sec.” Her thumbs broke some type of speed record.

Just before I was about to dig into her and take away her own phone for the rest of our trip, she said, “Done.” Then she extended her arm.

A second later, Luke buzzed by and snatched the phone out of her hand, then zipped around to Archie and me as he made a noise that sounded like an incoming helicopter. He dropped the phone in my hand, then raised his fist for Archie.

“Luke, my man. You da bomb,” Archie said, as he bumped Luke’s small fist and then pretended to blow up his hand.

“You’re dating yourself, Archie,” I said. “‘Da bomb’? That’s circa 1998, maybe earlier.”

“I’m hip and you know it. The kids certainly know it.”

It was easy to roll my eyes right in front of Archie since (a) he was too busy paying attention to the woman in a tiny orange bikini and mesh cover-up walking by, and (b) it was too dark for him to see me. Probably more (a) than (b).

I flicked through my phone with my free hand and found dozens of texts from Archie. “What’s so urgent anyway?”

After a couple of seconds, he peeled his eyes off the curvaceous girl and turned my way. “I spoke to what’s her name...”

“Cynthia?”

“Yeah, her.”

“The one you thought might be ‘the one’?” I moved the cone of light onto my face so he could see my subtle gesture toward the attractive woman who’d just passed.

“Yeah, well, a man can look, can’t he? Anyway...” He began to scratch his hairless chin. I noticed he had on a white and red T-shirt with the word “Baywatch” on the front. Maybe David Hasselhoff was his childhood hero, which would explain his cheesy ways and unique hairstyle.

“Cynthia and I met for drinks. I could tell something was on her mind. She seemed distant, constantly looking out to the water. So I suggested we take a walk on the pier.”

We could hear multiple octaves of laughter from behind us, and we both sneaked a quick glimpse in that direction. I motioned my arm for him to continue.

Another good-looking woman walked by. I snapped my fingers. “And so you’re on the pier with Cynthia...”

“Right. We watched some fish swim around, and then a seagull landed on a fence right next to us. She then said, ‘That’s me. The one on an island all by

herself.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing for a few seconds.”

My jaw dropped open. “And then?”

“I put my hand on her elbow and asked if she was okay, if there was anything I could do to help.”

Did Archie have a brother? I really didn’t want to know. “So...”

“I kind of let the game come to me, you know?”

“Not really, not from you anyway. Did you ask her what she meant about the island reference?”

“I got around to it, but not in an overbearing way. More about what I could do to help, you know, because of my CIA background.”

Anything to land the babe, apparently.

“And she didn’t get scared off by you mentioning the CIA?”

“Not in the least. But she did tell me this: she said she was in the middle of something big, really big, both professionally and personally.”

“Hmm. Did you ask her what this big thing was?”

“Didn’t get into it. She seemed to be on the verge of having some type of emotional reaction. I went and got us another drink, and she regained her composure.”

“Doesn’t sound like the cold-blooded personality the boys described.”

Archie shook his head.

A high-pitched shrill came from behind us, and I jerked my head around to see a girl running from the direction of the jellyfish, screaming in a giggly way. I guess she wasn’t impressed. It was enough to make my heart jump.

I took in a breath. “So how did you and Cynthia end it?”

“Well, she picked up the tab, which was a nice side benefit.”

I put my hand on Archie’s shoulder. “And you think you’re going to land the girl of your dreams running from the bar tab?”

“Just looking out for numero uno.” He smiled so widely I could see his white teeth glowing in the dark.

“Numero cheapo.”

“Hey, I just like to make sure I spend the money when it counts, if you know what I mean.” He gently poked his elbow into my ribs.

I couldn’t imagine...check that, I *could* imagine what he was thinking, and that made it totally gross.

“I plan ahead, just to make sure the repo man doesn’t show up at my house to haul off my Camaro.”

“You and Camaros. Sheesh.”

Luke buzzed by us again.

“Helicopter approaching beach position, over,” Archie said with his hand cupped over his mouth to make his voice sound like a radio.

Luke amped up his helicopter sound. I was surrounded by twelve-year-old kids.

“Luke, give us a minute. Archie and I need to finish our discussion.”

“I’m hungry,” he said on a flyby.

“Uh, not sure Teresa has anything at the house. But if you’re good, we’ll stop and pick up a late snack at Captain Roy’s Seafood Pit.”

“Sweet daddy!”

“Where were we?” I asked Archie as Luke continued running or whirring around on the beach. “Oh yes, how you use women to keep you out of debt.”

“She just paid for drinks. I would have picked up the motel bill if she would have...”

I jabbed my elbow into his ribs this time, and he grunted.

Luke laughed as he flew by once again. “A debt connector came by the house today,” he said.

I did a double take, distracted by Luke’s assembly of words.

“Little boy, it’s not connector. It’s collector,” Erin yelled out, always eager to point out her brother’s flaws.

“I understand what you’re saying, Luke.” I turned and scooted backward to ask Erin a follow-up question. “You’re saying a debt collector dropped by Teresa’s house today?”

“Yeah, Corey was in the shower, so I answered the door.”

I tried to get that picture out of my head, as well as the next frame with Erin taking a peek of Corey in the shower. *Chill, Alex.* Erin said she had no interest in Corey, so I should just believe her. And he’s into older...rather, more mature women.

“Debt collector. Are you sure they had the right house? I mean, she’s not exactly suffering,” I said with a chuckle.

Erin shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know how that stuff works. He just said she owes something like twenty-seven thousand dollars to his agency.”

“Twenty-seven thousand, four hundred seventy-six dollars, and thirty-nine cents,” Luke said, running between us.

I could see Dad and Carly giggling behind Erin. Luke obviously enjoyed being the center of attention.

“How would you know, runt? You weren’t even there.”

“I was standing just behind the door. And don’t call me names. Or is it that time of the month?”

I heard Archie guffaw through his teeth.

“Luke Giordano, that’s not cool,” I said. “Tell your sister you’re sorry.”

“Sorry,” he said with a fat lower lip.

Carly started speaking with Erin while I turned back to Archie, my mind spinning around the number Luke recited. “Twenty-seven thousand dollars? I don’t get it.”

“It happens to all of us. First, you get an online invite to join some chat room where you can win a cruise to the Grand Cayman Islands, and then the next thing you know, you’re getting email alerts from your bank saying that you authorized some company in Poland to withdraw ten thousand dollars

from your savings account.”

I pointed my finger at my one-time partner. “That happened to you?”

His eyes bugged out. “What...me? Nah. I’m just talking generically, about someone in the older community who could easily fall prey to online scams and shit like that.”

I released an unexpected yawn and tried to cover my mouth.

“You do have a nice set of canines on you,” Archie said.

I gave him one of my looks.

“My mom was a dental hygienist, so I know a lot about teeth. That’s why mine are so straight and white.”

“Glad someone in your family was concerned with personal hygiene.”

He snapped his wrist and made the sound of a drumstick tapping a cymbal. “Nice one. Do you pay anyone for those jokes? I hope not, because you’re going to lose money. You might have a debt collector showing up at your house.”

I feigned a half-smile, but couldn’t shake the thought of Teresa having financial issues. And not just carrying a little extra debt on a couple of credit cards. This was the type that brought debt collectors to her door. I began to wonder if there was more...more debt and more collectors.

“Hey, it’s Captain Rex!” Luke yelled, screaming by us. My eyes followed his path, and I saw Captain Rex wearing a mining hat with a soft light beaming from the middle, meandering around in the sand with his little metal detector. Damn, did this guy even have a life, or was he that obsessed with finding a lost treasure that likely didn’t exist?

Our procession halted. Dad and Carly were still about twenty feet behind us, casually chatting with Erin, although my dad had his arms crossed, his eyes on Luke...or was it Captain Rex?

“That guy looks like Uncle Jesse from *Dukes of Hazzard*. Who is he?” Archie asked me, barely moving his lips.

I snorted, trying to hide my laughter. “Archie, you actually made me laugh with you, not at you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you very little.” He cinched up his shorts.

My phone started buzzing. I was receiving a call. “Crap,” I said.

“You need to use a restroom?”

I rolled my eyes. “Crap in a good way. It’s Gretchen, probably calling with information.”

Archie nodded his head once and we both shuffled forward to get out of earshot of the others. I held the phone up to both our ears.

“Gretchen, hey. Alex here, along with Archie.”

“Are you guys outside? I hear the roar of the waves. I’m jealous,” she said.

“And I’m Brad.” It was the man who...what was he to me?

“Hey, Brad.”

“Hi, Alex. Gretchen patched me in. Nick is in the middle of some type of yoga class, so he won’t be on the call.”

“Well, Gretchen was right. We’re on the beach, but we have other family members nearby. I can’t take a lot of time, nor can I really get into anything right now. Do you have something important to share on either case?”

Brad went first. “We found a possible connection between Carly and—”

Gretchen butted in. “You’re not going to believe it.”

“You going to make us play the guessing game? Spit it out, will ya?” Archie said with a raised voice. Dad and Carly both glanced my way, then they turned back to my daughter, who was drawing something in the sand with her big toe. Actually, Dad’s gaze remained on Luke, or Captain Rex, or both, his face rigid.

“Hombre de Polvo, Powder Man,” Brad said.

I extended the phone from my face as Archie and I locked eyes, both of us tempted to glance over at Carly once again.

Ensuring that I turned my back to the family, I padded a few more steps and brought the phone closer to my mouth. “Ricardo Bolivar. The man we tracked in Brownsville yesterday. How?”

I could feel my pulse ticking faster and faster.

“It took quite a bit of work, and some convincing of folks to release information we couldn’t get otherwise, at least not quickly. But about four years ago, Carly and Bolivar attended the same addiction support group in Cameron County.”

I put a hand to my temple and tried to process what I’d just heard.

“So Bolivar is a recovering addict?” Archie said, his lips nearly touching mine as he spoke into the phone. Could it get any grosser?

“Maybe, I suppose,” Gretchen said.

“That’s not the point,” Brad interjected. “In fact, both of them were, ostensibly, in the court-ordered program because of drug convictions. So, while they could have used the support group to truly kick the habit, it also could have been an opportunity to collude with others of the same ilk.”

I tried to maintain some semblance of control, considering our immediate audience. “Interesting development.”

“Interesting, my ass,” Archie said a little too loudly, his voice a half-octave higher than norm. His bulging eyes stared at me. “We might have a frickin’ connection between the man linked to Kyle Spencer’s kidnapping and your future stepmother—the same woman who we think might have been the target of a drug cartel, I might add.”

I had to force myself to exhale. I was almost shaking. I coolly turned and eyed Carly. She had taken off her sandals and was mimicking Erin by drawing something in the sand with her foot. She seemed carefree, silly even—at the moment. Earlier, she’d been an emotional, manipulative wreck. It was rather obvious she had Dad wrapped around her finger.

“Cool, is that the lighthouse blinking over on Port Isabel?” Luke was

talking to Captain Rex. My mind was a blur.

“Alex, you there?” Brad asked as I craned my neck to see around a condo building to the Port Isabel side of the bay.

“We’re here,” I said with a light voice. I glanced at Archie. “I appreciate the information. Let us know if you learn anything further on this topic. Good to hear from you. Take care.”

We ended our call, and I turned back to the bay to see a light flash on, then off, at the lighthouse. “Dad, I thought the lighthouse was inoperable, more of a tourist attraction than a functional lighthouse that served a purpose. No?”

He was staring in the same direction, his arms still crossed. “Well, at different times, they’ll get in there and test the lights, or I think maybe even turn them on for the tourists. It is summer vacation season, after all.” The giggling girls caught his attention, and he looked down at their foot artwork.

I felt Archie’s hot breath on my neck as he hissed, “Alex, what are we supposed to do with this information? Carly and Bolivar? This is potentially very dangerous for anyone around her.”

I couldn’t have this confrontation—not so soon after hearing the data, and not on the beach in front of the family. I knew we were safe...for now. “I’ll call you later. We can discuss our next steps.” I scooted over to Luke and Captain Rex.

Archie sidled up to me again and continued flapping his jaw. “Alex, I really think we should act now,” he hissed. “Remember the shooting the other day? Your family could have gotten hurt...or worse.”

A burst of heat pulsated in my head. I flipped my head around, ready to cut Archie off at the ankles, even though I knew deep down that he had a point. He was simply following investigative protocol...as a PI and somewhat as a friend, as much as I hated to admit it.

“Whoa,” he said with two hands in front of his chest. I think he could see the fire in my eyes.

“Sorry. Like I said, later. In a little while, after I get the kids in bed.”

“You should have seen it, Captain. People screaming, bullets exploding through glass and cars. Even had one bullet bounce off the door of the lighthouse near where me and my sister were hiding out.”

I quickly approached Luke and the captain, putting my arm around my son’s shoulders. “You never told me this. Did you tell anyone else?”

He raised half of his top lip. “Nah. Me and Erin didn’t want you guys to worry. Wanted to show that we were brave.”

“Oh my, you are a brave little man,” Rex said, his eyes combing the beach as if he were hunting for food.

“Eh, my mom is the brave one. She ran right into the middle of it, just to make sure Carly and Grampy were okay.”

While I was happy to make my son proud, I knew my actions weren’t exactly responsible ones. The kids only had one parent now, and I couldn’t

allow that to be zero.

“Are you wearing perfume? Smells kind of nice.” I turned to see Archie sniffing my neck.

“Will you please give me some space?” I whispered. My eyes went immediately to Dad, just beyond Archie. He was staring down Rex, no doubt in my mind.

A second later. “Hey, everyone, hate to break up the beach party, but we old folks need to get our shut-eye,” Dad said. “I’ve got a fishing excursion in the morning. I think it’s a bunch of young guys, so I know they’ll be really loud and obnoxious.”

The kids gave out big hugs. I walked over and buried my head in my dad’s chest for a quick moment, then I turned to Carly, who was slipping on her sandals. I wanted to cuff her and have her taken away, out of my family’s life. But that was just a dream. I avoided the fake hug by looking at the sand artwork with my flashlight. It was the picture of a dolphin leaping out of water, and then written under that I spotted Carly’s work. *Carly + Donny = luv 4 ever.*

Who was the child?

“That dolphin is really creative, Erin.”

She gave me an “aw shucks” smile, then turned the focus back to Carly. “I think what she wrote is cute. Two lovesick kids,” she said with a giggle.

It made me want to gag. “Yeah,” was all I could say.

Dad reached out and shook Archie’s hand. “You worked with Alex back on that case a few months ago?”

“Sure did.”

“Well, thanks for helping her out. Nice to know someone has her back.”

Archie gave me the look, as if he wanted to say something right then and there about Carly’s connection. I had to remind myself that it was only a *possible* connection. Just because she and Bolivar attended meetings together didn’t mean they became confidants and crime buddies.

I could see Rex shuffling closer with his metal detector. “Dad, not sure you’ve met our new vacation friend, Captain Rex,” I said, extending a hand.

Rex lifted his eyes for a quick moment, then continued doing his thing. I turned back to Dad; his jovial mood had disappeared. Luke also seemed to take notice of his grandfather’s serious scowl.

“Grampy, you okay? Maybe we can go out on your boat sometime?”

Dad refused to respond to my introduction of Captain Rex and, instead, leaned down to eye level with Luke. “I’ll tell you what, day after tomorrow, if no jobs come up for me, I’ll take you out on the *Sweet Life*.”

“That’s the name of your boat? That’s a cool name.”

Luke’s appreciation for his grandfather was endearing, and it quickly diverted attention away from Dad’s apparent issues with Captain Rex. I wondered what this gentle old man had done to Dad. Undoubtedly, Dad had roped Rex into some group of people that had done him wrong. There was

always a long list through Dad's eyes. He didn't just stereotype people; he convicted them of high treason before he'd ever met them. Damn, it brought me back to when I was younger. I'd seen this a million times and, frankly, not only found it embarrassing, but also infuriating that a man at his age couldn't grow up and accept people for who they were, not by how they looked. For Dad to be laying judgment on people was absurd. I released a breath, wondering if he had any clue about Carly's connection—possible connection—to the man they called Hombre de Polvo.

Dad and Carly walked away, and I turned around to see Captain Rex heading off toward one of the long beach planks in the opposite direction. Didn't even say goodbye. Hopefully, he wasn't too offended by Dad's rudeness.

"Okay, guys, I think it's time we head to the car. You want that snack, right, Luke?"

"Yeah, just one sec," he said, spotting a sand crab. He darted away, but at least he was running north, in the same general direction as our car.

"Hey, Alex." Archie stumbled over a tuft of sand and bumped my shoulder as I walked up the beach. "After seeing Carly and your dad interact, I just can't help but think there's something there. We don't have a smoking gun, but I feel heat. And when I feel heat—"

I put my hand up. "I feel it too."

"What are you guys talking about?" Erin had snuck up between us, and I quickly regretted getting into it at all with Archie. Why couldn't we have waited until later?

"It's nothing, Erin. Just adult stuff."

"I may be fifteen, but I'm not stupid. I heard you mention Carly and Grampy by name. And you guys are whispering, like they're involved in some type of conspiracy to take down the president. This is kind of creeping me out."

"Sweetie, it's not what you think. You know the line of work I'm in. And then with the shooting and Archie's involvement, we're just swapping mental notes. Just know that you and your brother are safe. That's my first responsibility, and then I do have a responsibility for the safety of the American people."

She gave me her typical teenage smirk. "Okay. Whatever." She jogged ahead, catching up to Luke.

Archie started opening his mouth, but I held up a finger. "Again, let me get them home. That should allow me some time to think through our options. And yes, nothing is off the table at the moment."

"Good. I'll be waiting for your call, as long as Cynthia doesn't ring me up for a booty call first." He smiled.

"TMI, Archie."

I flipped back around and could only see the faint outline of the kids way up ahead, chasing another sand crab or two. *Damn, kids have endless energy.*

Luke scampered into the deeper sand. I would have said something, but we were headed in that direction on our way to the car. A playful smattering of laughs and yelling brought my eyes over to the shallow tide where a young couple kicked water onto each other.

“Young love,” I said to Archie. “Not a care in the world. They think every day will be just like today. No worries, always getting along, always on the same page, sharing every dream and idea with each other. They just don’t understand how jaded the world can make you and how it can erode a relationship.”

“Like between you and Mark?” he said with hesitation in his voice.

I shifted my eyes for a brief second over to Archie, then back to the young couple. I inhaled another ocean breeze. “Yeah, Archie. I think we were caught in the tornado and couldn’t escape, refused to look in the mirror in the middle of the journey.” I turned back to the kids. “I’m not sure how, but I wish there was some way I could help teach the kids that valuable lesson before they fall in love and think that person will complete them.”

“I think you’re already doing a good job. No, a *great* job,” Archie said, drawing my gaze. “You’re only human, Alex, and no one leads the perfect life. But the kids admire your strength, what you’ve been able to do for them in the last few months and for the world we live in. And when they mess up—and they will mess up, even as adults—you’ll be there to lend them a hand or give them some sage advice. Because that’s how you roll.”

I had to remember to take another breath. Archie had stunned me. I put my hand on his arm. “Thank you, Archie. Means a lot.”

“Well, I’m off like a prom dress,” he said, scooting backward in the sand. “Gotta make a stop at the store on the way back to my fleabag motel.”

“You’re staying in one of *those* motels?”

“Nah, just kidding. I got the Spencers to pick up the bill for me to stay at the Palladium. Fifteen-hundred-square-foot condo and an ocean view people would kill for. Like I said, call me later. Lots to discuss.”

I waved at him, just as I heard another yell at the ocean. I turned my head, expecting to see the same young couple frolicking in the water. But they were actually hugging each other. Then I realized the sound didn’t come from the ocean side. I jerked my sights around while aiming the flashlight.

Another scream, and then the crackle of...

Gunshots.

Before my heart could leap out of my chest, I darted out of my stance toward the kids. “Luke, Erin, get down!” I saw them turning their heads. “Get down,” I said as I motored through the sand and water.

They either didn’t hear me or didn’t take me seriously.

I ran up to Luke, who said, “Mom, I think the island is putting on a fireworks show. Can we go see?”

“Down to the ground. Now.” I flipped my head around just as another crackle echoed between buildings. Then another scream. It was Carly.

“Shit,” I said.

“I got the kids, Alex. Go,” Archie said as he pulled to a stop in between Erin and Luke, pulling them both to the sand.

“What’s going on, Mom, Archie?” I heard Erin say.

I hauled ass but only made it four or five steps, then I stopped on a dime and turned back to Archie. “Do you have your piece on you?”

“Left it in the car.”

He mumbled something else, but I didn’t wait to hear it. I’d already turned back around and started to chug my arms as I struggled to plow through the deeper sand. I held the flashlight like a baton in a relay race. As I rounded a large sand dune, the cone of light flickered against the dense vegetation on the mound of sand. A few more steps and I reached the wooden plank bridge. I slipped on my first step, but used my opposite hand to push off of a plank and regain my stride. I was making much quicker progress, and I looked thirty degrees to my right. I thought that might be the top of Carly’s head. It disappeared every other step.

A few more strides and I tried to think what I’d do when I got there—if the shooters were still there, or if they were holding Carly or my dad hostage. Could they be the same guys from a few days earlier? Two of them had been shot, so it was hard to imagine.

Without much time, I leaped off the wooden planks and raced across a patch of grass behind a set of condos. I heard tires screeching off pavement. Just on the other side of a row of hedges, I could now see Carly with two hands over her face. A car behind her had been shot up. Another black SUV.

Where was Dad?

With my head on a swivel and my hand gripping the flashlight as if it would turn into a light saber, I hurdled the hedges. Overestimating my leaping ability, my foot clipped a branch. I tumbled to the concrete parking lot. My hands took most of the impact, skidding on loose gravel, but my forehead bounced off the unforgiving surface, followed by my knees.

“Call the cops, get the paramedics here. Quick!” a man yelled out as I raised my head and saw a handful of men running toward Carly and the car.

I still couldn’t see Dad. Pushing up from the concrete, I sprinted toward Carly, noticing at least five or six bullet holes in the front quarter panel of the vehicle. The tire was also flat to the ground.

“Where is he, Carly?” I said, grabbing her shoulder. Before she could respond, I saw his feet, so I kept moving around the SUV. Two more quick strides and I was down on the ground staring at my father. A pool of blood gathered at the side of his head, his lips open, but no other movement.

I looked up at a sobbing Carly. “Is he dead?”

All she could do was nod, cry, and jump up and down.

I couldn't help but glare at Carly and her kicking foot. I wrenched my hand around the plastic arms of my chair over and over again—anything to keep me occupied so that I wouldn't lunge out of my sitting position and pound the shit out of her until she told me what kind of perilous situation she had dragged Dad into. We had taken separate cars to the Harlingen Medical Center off Highway 83. I insisted on riding in the back of the ambulance, while Carly rode in an SPI police car. Someone was smart enough to keep us separated, but that only lasted until Dad was taken behind the swivel doors as one medic carried an oxygen tank to the side of the medical team procession—two doctors, three nurses, and the two paramedics.

Fortunately, Dad still had a pulse. His breathing was faint but steady. He'd been shot in the head, but the bullet grazed his temple, so there were no entrance or exit wounds. But a whole lot of blood. More blood than I'd seen at a bomb explosion a couple of months back.

I looked down at the silver and black squares of industrial carpeting in the waiting room. A man carrying a handful of magazines plodded toward our area and paused just next to me.

"Are you waiting to be taken back?" he said.

I lifted my eyes for a brief second, and I saw concern in his eyes. "I'm waiting on someone. Thanks."

"Well, you might want them to mend you up. Looks like you've been injured."

I brought a hand to my forehead and winced slightly. It was partially numb, but my fingertips had rolled across at least a couple of pebbles. "I'm fine, thank you." I crossed my legs and began my own kicking routine as the man shrugged and walked away.

I exhaled loudly and stared at Carly. She refused to look at me. Her eyes were swollen from tears, and she held a tattered tissue in one hand. She wasn't emotional at the moment. In fact, she seemed drained, almost in a catatonic state. I began to chide myself for not following my gut, for not pushing harder when I had the chance at Dad's house, and for believing their bullshit.

But what did Dad really know? Knowing she had likely crossed paths with Bolivar, who not only was connected to a sex/drug house that might be set up to extort information from or influence over local, state, and maybe federal officials, he was also involved in some way in the Kyle Spencer kidnapping.

Even though my thoughts were with Dad, hoping he'd pull through, I couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Carly, you've got to tell me what the fuck you have done." My intensity was so strong, I could feel my eyelids quivering. She opened her purse and dug through it, pretending I didn't exist.

“Tell me, dammit!” I smacked the top of the plastic arm of my chair with an open palm, and I could feel the sting of my open wound all the way up to my elbow.

Just then, a nurse barreled through the door. “He’s awake. You can see him now.”

I curled out of my chair and was through the doors in no time.

“Are you family?” the slender nurse asked.

“I’m his daughter, yes.” I started walking down the wide hall, curtains on both sides, that familiar hospital smell of disinfectant lingering in the chilled air. “Where is he?” I asked, my arms tucked against my ribcage. When I didn’t hear an immediate response, I turned to look over my shoulder and found Carly speaking with the nurse. “She’s not family,” I said.

Carly splayed her arms, then continued speaking with the nurse. I didn’t want to waste another breath on that woman—not until I knew Dad was okay. I asked two staffers where I could find the room for Donald Troutt, and they pointed toward the room at the end of the hall.

I heard soft voices as I put my fingers on the facing of the wooden door. I peeked inside and found Dad hooked up to a bunch of machines, his head with a fresh wrapping. Two women stood at the end of his bed, both reviewing information from a tablet held by a nurse in purple scrubs.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Thomas, Debbie Thomas,” she said, extending her hand.

“How’s he doing?”

Before she could respond, the door smacked the wall and Carly came barreling into the room going straight for Dad.

“She’s not family” were the first words out of my mouth.

“We’re practically married, right, Donny?” she said, moving to a chair at his bedside as she removed her purse and set it down next to her.

“Married, my ass.”

“Ladies,” Dr. Thomas said. “This is exactly what he cannot have. He needs quiet and calm.”

I gave her a stiff nod without looking at Carly. “What’s your assessment of him?”

“Decent amount of blood loss, and he’s got a nasty gash. But his main issue is that he suffered a concussion.”

“That makes sense. He hit the concrete pretty damn hard,” Carly said. Her jaw was overactive, and I realized she was chewing gum.

It would have been nice for her to offer that information when I found both of them in the parking lot.

“Is he going to be okay?”

Dr. Thomas put her hand on my forearm. “He should be fine, as long as he takes it easy for a week or so. But we want to keep him overnight, make sure his dressing is changed on his wound, keep an IV in him for antibiotics and pain, and keep him hydrated. A concussion, especially at his age, is nothing to slough off.”

“Oh, that Donny, he’s one hardheaded son of a bitch, I tell you.” She smacked her gum, and then patted Dad’s hand...right where the IV needle stuck into his skin. He flinched.

“Ooh!” she yipped, hopping up in her seat.

Dad moved his head and moaned a little, but kept his eyes shut.

I gritted my teeth as the nurse swung around me. “Miss...”

“Just call me Carly. Everyone does.”

“Carly, you can’t touch or tug on the tube connected to the IV needle. That probably hurt your, uh...”

“My dad.” She needed to give him a label, so I gave her one.

“Her dad, right. Just please be very careful, will you?”

“Okay,” she said, leaning back in the chair, propping her hand under her chin.

She was lucky we had chaperones in the room.

“I’ll drop by during my rounds in the morning,” Dr. Thomas said, handing the tablet to the nurse. “If he checks out okay, I’ll release him.” She walked to the exit and put a hand on the door, then she turned back to us. “I have no idea who or what caused this incident. I will say the obvious: if that bullet had hit him a half inch to the right, it would have created severe brain damage and most likely...well, you know. All I’m saying is...please be safe and steer clear of whatever got him in the hospital. He’s a very lucky man. But you can’t buy luck.”

She gave Carly and me both a stern look and then walked out. The nurse checked his vital signs one more time, then leaned in and spoke to him. “Mr. Troutt, I’m Angie, your overnight nurse. You’re going to be hearing plenty from me tonight. If you need anything, just click this button. I’ll place it in your left hand.” She did as she said. “Would you like any ice chips, water even, or maybe Sprite?”

He licked his lips, but his eyes remained shut.

She giggled, keeping the mood light. “Tell you what, I’ll get some ice chips for you and one of these pretty ladies here can feed you some as you wake up, okay? I’ll be right back.”

She scooted out of the room without saying another word to Carly or me. My nemesis immediately started kicking again. I got the feeling she’d be doing something a lot more disturbing if she had access to it, but who was I to judge? As I thought about it more, I was well within my right to be judge, jury, and executioner—in a nonviolent way, of course. For the second time on our vacation, my kids had been put in harm’s way. This time they were farther away from the shooting, but bullets are not programmable. I recalled Luke opening up to me about the incident near the lighthouse, where one bullet had somehow penetrated the confines of the tall, concrete-and-metal structure.

I pinched the corners of my eyes and tried to force out a breath. I looked at Dad, then over to Carly, who had turned her body away from me. She was kicking like a drill team girl, all the while chewing manically on her gum. She

had something churning in her brain. I wondered what it was. What did she know about these obviously targeted threats against her and Dad?

I needed to give her another try, using a kinder, gentler approach. I pumped out one more calming breath, hoping I could keep my emotions in check. “Carly, can you step into the hallway, please?”

She snatched her purse off the ground, then kissed Dad on the shoulder and followed me into the hallway.

“What is it now, Alex? What could be so important to take our time and focus away from your father at a time when he needs it most?”

Her first shot was a guilt grenade.

“Dad lying in a hospital bed with a bullet wound and concussion is why we need to have this discussion, the one we never really had at your house earlier today.”

“Not sure what you’re implying.”

I dropped my arms and attempted to keep my voice serene. “Can’t turn back the clock, so let’s just start over. I need you to tell me who you are involved with that would want to harm you, or even Dad. That’s the only way I can prevent it from happening again, before someone dies, Carly.”

“You need this, you need that.” She leaned forward and poked at her chest so hard I could hear the thump. “What about my needs, Miss Perfect?”

Name-calling and more deflection. She was a real pro at this.

I ignored her personal attack. “What has you so spooked? Is someone threatening you or Dad? I can help you. I have the resources to truly help you.”

She shook her head and closed her eyes for a brief moment. “Promises. Do you know how many people have promised me things in my life and never come through, or have instead turned around and hurt me? Not just hurt me, but destroyed my will to live?”

She had more emotional scar tissue than a hundred people. How Dad couldn’t see that was beyond me, although I knew his list of regrets was a mile long. “I’m not here to hurt you or make you look bad. If you’ve done something wrong, it’s better to face it now, own up to it. Dad used to tell me when I was a little girl that one lie left unchecked was like throwing a rock in a pond. It would create ten times as many ripples, and each ripple would cause more damage than the original lie.”

She released an emotional chuckle while planting her hands on her hips. “Oh, dear God, if I have to hear another story about how picture-perfect your life was, I think I’m going to puke.”

Carly just didn’t get it. Her paranoia was off the radar. “Carly, please stop playing these games to divert attention from my question to something else. Your life is in danger, Dad’s life is in danger, and you’re putting my kids’ lives in danger. For what? For who? I’m not asking you anymore. Tell me.”

“Tell me?” Her chest heaved as her right eye twitched. I thought she might start hyperventilating. “No one...I mean *no one* will ever have the right

to direct me to do anything. You know about my past, and for you to stand there with your fancy education like some smug bitch and order me to do anything...well, you've got some nerve, Alex. If your father wasn't so special, I would walk out of here and never return."

"We should be so lucky." The words spilled out before I thought through the possible impact.

With makeup smeared across her fiery face, she parted her lips to speak, but she paused—as if blood flow to the part of her brain that controlled speech had just been shut off. She clutched at her purse.

"You are Mr. Troutt's daughter, right?"

I could see a nurse in purple scrubs approaching me from the hallway off to my right, but I couldn't take my gaze off Carly. Her intensity was redlining.

"Carly, I've tried everything, and whether you're doing it intentionally or it's just part of your natural personality, you're taking everything very personally. We're not getting anywhere. Will you please open up and share with me what is going on? For Dad, for the kids...and yes, for you."

Two more audible breaths as her quivering chin jutted out. "Alex..."

She stopped there and continued to seethe.

"Alex, that's your name." I hadn't noticed the nurse pulled up next to us. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but—"

I kept my focus on the trembling mess in front of me. "Carly, detectives at the crime scene said they would meet you here at the hospital. And while I've restrained myself so far, I'm going to have to get more involved and call in resources to work this case from a federal level."

I purposely kept Raul and the DEA out of my statement. I didn't want to give her any insight into my next move.

"You don't give a fuck about me," she hissed while shaking her head. "And you can bring in the US Attorney General, for all I care. It doesn't change what happened. We are the victims, dammit. And you refuse to acknowledge it."

"This is insane. But I guess if you won't willingly share what you know, you'll be taken into custody and *forced* to share what you know. You'll have to get a lawyer. It will be expensive, but over time, you will break and they will get their information. And frankly, based upon what I'm seeing, where there's smoke there's fire—which means you are involved in illegal activities. You will go to jail. Given your record, the prison sentence won't be brief or easy." I leaned closer. "Is any of this resonating with you?"

Shaking her head, Carly turned to the nurse, but she didn't seem to really see her. Then, as if her arm were attached to a slingshot, she hurled a fist toward my jaw. On pure instinct, I swung my arm to block her attempt, then hunched lower and began to fire a counterpunch, but I somehow halted my fist inches before it connected with her jaw.

A hand waved in between us. "Ladies," the nurse said. "I'm sure we can talk this out."

Carly didn't say a word, and I remained silent, my eyes drawn to the spindly blue veins protruding from her neck. She looked inside Dad's room, then she turned back to me and threw her purse over her shoulder. "You have no idea." She jabbed her finger at my face. "And what you think you're doing here will only get you killed."

Before I could respond, she flipped on a heel and walked toward the exit.

I thought about going after her, but I had no cuffs on me. I glanced around, hoping I'd spot a security guard.

"Alex," the nurse said again.

"I'm sorry. You've been standing there this entire time. We've got a lot going on. What do you need?"

"Your father. He just woke up and was asking for his two lovely ladies." She walked around me and I followed her back into the room.

"There's my special agent." With his bed lifted to more of a sitting position, Dad actually cracked a smile while sipping from a straw.

I tried to match his smile as I approached his bedside. "How are you doing, Dad?" I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

He swatted a hand. "I'm fine. All of this hullabaloo is ridiculous. I've cut myself shaving worse than this little nick," he said, pointing at the bandage wrapping his head.

He paused, then attempted to lean forward and look behind me. "Where did my beauty go? Don't tell me, she's on the hunt for a coffee."

Nurse Angie was milling about in the room and approached his bed from the other side, her eyes finding mine for a split second.

"Mr. Troutt, how are those ice chips going down?"

"Alex, you're just standing there." His eyes shifted between me and Nurse Angie. "What's going on? Where's Carly?"

"Dad, she left."

"Left to go where?"

"She didn't say."

He set down his cup and leaned back. "Did the two of you get into this shit again?"

"I only want to know what's going on so I can help. I'm wired to protect and I can't...I won't let anything happen to the kids, or you either, Dad."

His cheery mood had evaporated as his lips pressed together.

The nurse looked my way, then back to Dad. "Mr. Troutt, you need to stay calm. Family dynamics are never easy, but life goes on. So, the best thing you can do for your daughter, for anyone who cares about you is to ignore all of this emotional stuff and be selfish. Relax, enjoy the bedside service, and if you're lucky, you'll get to go home tomorrow."

He just stared straight ahead.

The cadence of the beeping heart monitor increased, and I saw the nurse watching the machine, which showed his pulse at 85 and rising.

"Mr. Troutt, you really need to listen to instructions. Your health is too

important.”

“Ahh,” he muttered with his arms crossed.

“I’ll watch after him,” I said.

The nurse left the room, and I took a seat. Dad lowered the bed and turned on his side, away from me. I wasn’t offended. I was just glad he’d stopped his rant. It was apparent that he finally listened to his body. After a couple of recovery breaths, I pulled out my phone and traded text messages with Archie.

He said the kids had watched some TV, then gone to bed. Corey had just shown up. Teresa, again, was out late.

I huffed out a breath. I knew I had to find time for my friend. Her daughter’s death was something she had never brought up to me. And what about this debt collector who showed up at the house?

Archie fired back another text.

Did Carly ever open up?

Me: *Hell no. It’s all about her. She’s hiding something. We had a fight and she just took off. I can’t tell if Dad knows or not.*

Archie: *What’s next???*

I thought I could hear Dad snoring. I went back to the phone.

Me: *DEA – Raul. Probably a call with Boston. U got any ideas?*

Archie: *Bolivar. He’s our best lead. And Cynthia knows something. I need more time with her.*

Me: *Agreed.*

Archie: *Hold on...Cynthia calling. I’ll get back to u.*

It was almost two a.m. Why would she be calling Archie at that hour? Was there something brewing on the big item she hinted at to Archie? From an entirely different perspective, maybe she couldn’t resist the blowhard any longer. It could be what he’s been dreaming about for days—the booty call. While Archie had shown a few moments of surprising sensitivity and, dare I say, maturity, he wasn’t my type. In fact, he’d be the last guy in the last group of guys I would ever consider.

I got up and paced the room a few times, wondering when the local cops would walk through the door. I knew they’d ask about Carly. I couldn’t hide my suspicions any longer. But could I really trust them? The stories of local officials, maybe a police chief, being tied to the party house had me concerned.

I peeked through the blinds and scanned the parking lot. I saw two men in suits walking toward the front entrance. I thought I recalled seeing them at the crime scene. I glanced over at Dad, who was snoozing now, then paced to the other side of the room. I wanted to trust these men, supposedly the good guys. But I couldn’t be naïve—it could cost lives. And I’d be damned if my desire to be a team player would put my kids, or Dad, in harm’s way again. I decided to keep to the facts, then touch base with those I trusted: the Boston crew, Raul, and even Archie. The kidnapping, the party house, Carly’s crazy responses to questions and her possible ties to Bolivar...it seemed like the two

cases overlapped, but I couldn't be sure. We had bits and pieces of evidence and very few connecting points.

Before the detectives could make their way up to the room, I shot off a group text to Brad, Gretchen, and Nick. I couldn't wait until daylight to convene the brain trust—too much was at stake. If no one responded within the hour, I'd have to make personal wakeup calls. Another glance between the blinds to stare at the mostly barren parking lot. For just a few seconds, I imagined walking into Brad's bedroom, seeing him asleep with his shirt off, the sheet stopping just below his waistline. And then I slowly slinked into bed, nestled up next to him, and—

"Excuse me, Alex Trout?"

I turned and found one of the two detectives sticking his head in the door.

"Don't want to bother your father. Can you step into the hallway for a quick conversation?"

I was already headed that way. Our introductions were professional, even courteous. We found three chairs by a vending machine, where one of them paid for my coffee.

"Thank you," I said, feeling the first hot sip trail down my chest, knowing that within a few minutes I'd feel an infusion of energy and focus.

The conversation went just as easily as the introductions. If anything, they seemed a little out of their league when discussing drive-by shootings and possible ties to gangs and drug cartels. I could have written the Q&A script, so no surprises on my end. I stayed with the facts and kept my opinions and theories to myself—they didn't know to press me otherwise.

Then we got to the one sticky point. "And where is the girlfriend?" the chubby-jowled detective asked. I'd already forgotten his name. "Uh, Carly Irsham."

"She left a couple of hours ago."

"Do you know why she left and where she went?"

"She didn't really say. It's awfully late, so maybe she needed sleep."

The detective looked at his partner, then licked his fingers and flipped the page in his notebook. "Are you and Ms. Irsham on speaking terms, getting along?"

"I really don't know her very well. We just met when my family and I came down here for vacation."

The pair traded glances and nodded at the exact same time.

"You're from this area, aren't you?"

"A fighting Tarpon, yes." I gave a halfhearted effort to hold up my fist, and then I thought about Archie's version of our mascot. Yep, he was still sixteen.

"So, as an FBI agent, and someone who's from this area, do you have any particular insight into why your Dad and his girlfriend have been involved in two drive-by shootings in the last three days? You have to admit, the odds are pretty crazy. We typically don't have one of these a year."

I pressed my lips together and feigned a look of deep thought. “Don’t really have anything that comes to mind. Since it involves my own family, I guess I’m just focused on making sure they’re safe and recovering.”

I moved to the edge of my seat, eager to check on Dad and see if my Boston team had awakened for our call.

They read my body language.

“Well, uh, thank you for the time. We’ll need to talk to your dad when he’s feeling up to it, maybe tomorrow?”

I nodded.

“And I guess we need to locate Carly Irsham. We’ll drop by their house and see if she’s at home. We’ll let you go be with your family.”

We shook hands, and I went back into the room, where Dad was reaching for his cup of melted ice.

“Let me get that for you, Dad.”

I handed it to him as he electronically raised his bed and sipped from his cup. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had creases from the pillow running down the side of his face.

“Did you get a little nap?”

“Can’t really do that when they wake me up every few minutes to verify I haven’t kicked the bucket.” His phlegmy voice and attitude made him sound like an old curmudgeon.

He used his opposite hand to tug at the IV attached to his hand. He groaned and yanked harder.

“I can help you there,” I said, untangling the plastic tube from the railing.

“Thanks,” he said, pushing himself higher in the bed. He looked to the door. “Any sign of Carly?”

“No,” I said, keeping it brief. “How are you feeling?”

His eyes suddenly focused on the end of the bed, a cold stare that made me wonder if his concussion had thrown him into some type of withdrawn state of mind.

“Dad?” I shifted to the end of the bed. He didn’t adjust his glare, so I leaned over and waved a hand. “Dad, do I need to call a nurse?”

He lifted his head quickly, turned to the window, then threw back his covers. “What time is it?”

I pulled out my phone and thumbed a button. “Just a few minutes after five. Why?”

“I’ve got to get to my boat. I’ve got a fishing excursion I need to skipper.”

He looked left and right—for what, I had no idea. I grabbed his mound of sheets and blankets and began to move them over his legs. “Dad, it’s obvious your head injury is impairing your judgment. I understand what that’s like more than anyone.”

He shuffled his feet, pushing the covers lower again as he continued scanning the room. He didn’t acknowledge a word I said, let alone try to draw a little father/daughter connection to the severe head injury I’d suffered

several months back.

“Dad, this isn’t something you can fake. The brain takes time to heal. I know you don’t want to hear that. I didn’t want to hear that after my crash either.”

“Do you see any gauze pads and extra bandaging around? Check in those cabinets in the corner, will you?”

Just to satisfy his curiosity I walked over and opened the cabinet. “Only blankets and pillows. Oh, and a set of barf bags,” I said, looking over my shoulder.

He pulled his oxygen out of his nose and unhooked the tubing from around his ears, then swung his legs over the side of the bed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I knew my voice sounded like I was chiding Luke or Erin for doing something really childish, but it was unavoidable. Dad had lost his marbles, and there was no one else around to play the guardian role.

“Alex, I don’t want us to have another argument, but you have to realize I have a job to do. I can’t call in sick. People rely on me to take them fishing. It might sound like a leisurely activity, but it’s not on my end.”

“Dr. Thomas said no physical activity for at least a week or so.”

“I won’t try to do anything stupid. I’m not a five-year-old kid, Alex.” He began to paw at the tape around his IV.

“What the hell, Dad? You can’t do that. A nurse needs to take out your IV.”

“You’ve got to remember some of the stories I told you, back in training, and when I had a few rescue missions that involved me and a bunch of fishing hooks? I peeled ten hooks off my skin, and I didn’t have a nurse around talking nicey-nice.”

He ripped off one piece of tape.

“Dad, this is ludicrous. Just wait a few hours until the doctor does her rounds. She’ll probably release you.”

“It will be too late then.” He lifted his eyes, and for a brief moment, I saw something different than defiance. He suddenly seemed vulnerable, scared possibly.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Dad, you’ve got to tell me what’s really going on. You can’t keep everything inside.”

He bit into his lip. “I’m just worried about my little boat, that’s all. The motor’s been acting up lately, and I don’t want to be stranded ten miles out to sea and then have to be towed back into port. It would be embarrassing and cost me a shitload of money.”

I rubbed the area just under my eyes, and despite the infusion of caffeine, a weary impatience trudged through my veins. And it was mainly targeted at my own father and his girlfriend.

“Dad, this isn’t going to happen.”

“It sure as hell is. I’m not ten, and you’re not my mother. I’ve got

responsibilities. I can't let people down."

He snapped off another piece of tape. "Now, can you get me my clothes?"

I started walking to the door. "I'm getting a nurse. Maybe she can talk some sense into you."

He yelled a string of curse words as I tore down the hall, searching for our nurse. Just beyond the nurse's station, where four women with wide hips scarfed down brownies, I spotted Nurse Angie. I gave her a quick recap of what Dad was trying to do, and she practically raced me back to his room.

She opened the door and both of us saw an empty bed. I moved closer and found a huge stain of blood on the sheet.

"He took out his fucking IV. That—"

Just then, I heard a murmur of an echoing voice. The nurse raised a finger and ceased movement as both of our heads turned to the bathroom. A minute later, the toilet flushed and Dad came out of the bathroom with his street clothes on and his hand wrapped in what appeared to be a pillowcase. He was pushing his cell phone into his pocket, when he paused, looking at both of us. The nurse took the lead.

"Mr. Troutt, where do you think you're going? Don't answer that, because I'll tell you where you're going. You're going to put your gown back on and get your ass back in that bed. And then I'm going to put that IV back in you, probably on the other hand, and then continue the medication and fluids prescribed by Dr. Thomas. No questions asked." She pointed at the bed, her chin lifting a couple of inches.

I wanted to pump my fist, relieved that someone else was finally trying to rein in his foolishness.

He just shook his head and smiled. "Are you going to taser me or cuff me, Alex? Is that what this has come to now? I'm a grown man. I can do any damn thing I please."

"Frankly, if I had my cuffs on me, I probably would. But I don't, so it's going to take you acting like an adult."

He scratched the back of his head, then looked at me and started to say something.

"What?"

"Nothing, Alex. I need to go." He took a step for the door, and the nurse shuffled to her right, blocking his path.

"I can't let you do that, Mr. Troutt. You haven't been released, and you're in no condition to be moving around."

He sighed, and I could see he was debating to shove her out of the way. The door suddenly opened.

"Nurse's aide here to take your breakfast order," a woman with a pleasant voice said. The door clipped the back of Nurse Angie's shoe, and she fell forward. The aide saw her colleague fall to the ground and quickly bent down to help her.

"I'm so sorry. How clumsy of me. I had no idea you were behind the

door, Angie.”

Using the chaos as his opportunity for escape, Dad scooted around the two ladies and out the door.

“I’ll be damned, I think I might have torn my Achilles tendon, and it hurts like a motherfucker,” Nurse Angie said.

I paused where she was sprawled out on the floor, her face etched with intense anguish. “I’m sorry. Let me get help,” I said on my way out the door.

Straight ahead, I could see Dad pushing through the double doors heading to the waiting area. He was actually leaving! I yelled over to the group of nurses munching on food at their station. “Your colleague, Angie, might have torn her Achilles. She needs help.”

They dropped what they were eating and scrambled into action, while I made a beeline for the double doors. Halfway there, my walk turned into a jog, and I could feel eyes on me. I didn’t give a shit. I burst through the doors. The only person I saw was a man with a thick, gray mustache reading the newspaper. He yawned and looked at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dad walking through a second set of sliding glass doors. The exit.

He had no car, so unless he expected to walk to his house or all the way to where his boat was docked, he had reached the end of the line. Damn, he was stubborn.

Out through both sets of doors I went. Dad was by the curb under the portico, pacing back and forth, the blood-soaked pillowcase still wrapped around his hand and his head bandaged up. He looked a mess.

“Dad, this is taking everything too far. Come back inside, and let’s talk this out.”

“Dammit, don’t you know how to listen, Alex? I’m not going back into that hospital.” He kept pacing with surprising strength.

“This is it, Dad. Tell me what’s going on, or I’m out of here. I’m taking the kids and we’re going back to Boston and you won’t hear from us. I can’t put their lives at risk because you and Carly are too blind or obstinate to help yourselves.” I crossed my arms and tapped my shoe off the ground. He stopped pacing and looked me in the eye. His glare wasn’t mean or spiteful. Instead, it was full of sadness, and I could feel a swell of emotion in my gut.

“Dad?” A puff of warm air blew hair into my face, but otherwise there was silence.

I repeated myself. “Dad, are you going to respond?”

A whirring engine caught my attention and a miniature lime green car sped up to the curb. Before I could take a step, Dad had folded himself into the back seat.

I looked at the driver. He was young with an overgrown beard. He had in his earbuds, rocking to some type of beat.

Dad lowered the window a few inches. “I got myself into this mess, and I’ll get myself out, Alex. Don’t worry. I’m a proud man. I can’t rely on my daughter to rescue me every time I get into trouble.”

A breath caught in the back of my throat. “Dad!”

He rolled up the window and tapped the driver on the shoulder. It zipped away from the curb before I woke out of my trance to check out the license plate number, then it disappeared out of the parking lot in seconds. I wondered if I’d ever see my dad alive again.

Soft cotton sheets brushed against his fingertips. The scent of hickory-smoked bacon lingered in the air as a few pots and pans clanged together in Mom's kitchen. For a moment, Kyle Spencer literally thought he was back home in Boston—he was twelve or thirteen years old, lying in the most comfortable bed in the world. His bed.

He swallowed but immediately coughed, waking himself up from his slumber. Opening his eyes, he realized it had been a dream. But it also was the best sleep since he thought his life had ended. He shifted under the covers, and a jolt of pain shot up his leg, ending with a pop at the base of his back. The bottom of his foot throbbed, although it had subsided some since he had dozed off a few hours earlier—after Aunt Kitty took care of his wounds, hydrated him, and gave him food. Her chicken noodle soup had been otherworldly. He'd have to get the recipe so his mom, or one of the many cooks she employed, could try to mimic the special brew.

Looking around the room, the walls were painted a deep burgundy, the texture so prominent it almost seemed like they were padded. He felt like he'd been thrown back to the early 1900s. There was an antique chest with a marble top and a taller chest of drawers made out of cherry wood with a collection of cut crystal on top. An old-fashioned baby's bed was off to his left. The lamps on either side of the four-post bed had lace hanging from the white shades. Two patchwork quilts hung from rods on two of the walls.

Yes, it was like he'd been sent back in time. He took in another breath and tried to allow his body to relax, the memories of the endless torture still prickling his mind. And what about his escape? It was an absolute miracle he'd escaped during the shootout, with hardly an ounce of energy or willpower left in his battered body. Collapsing right outside the back door of Aunt Kitty's Bed & Breakfast was a sign from above. An angel had descended, taken him into her wings, and blessed him with the gift of life. Actually, it felt more like a rebirth. A new opportunity for Kyle Spencer to turn his life around, to be one of the truly good guys, not just one who pretended to be that way when it was politically correct or when he wanted to score with a woman. When he got back home, he'd go to church, vow to never smoke another joint, sniff another line of coke, or even have a beer. He would live a pure life and be an example to everyone, be that person who finally saw the writing on the wall.

He listened to his calming heartbeat and his intake of lung-filling breaths, appreciating the freedom to stretch his limbs, do whatever he wanted without the fear of unstoppable retribution or being caged in a closed box for hours, days at a time.

Life was good.

But he knew today would be a big day. The day when he would finally share his horrific story with law enforcement, to help them find the perpetrators and make those fuckers pay for what they did to him. Okay, he wouldn't use the F word. He had issues to work through. He knew he would probably require a shrink visit or two...or maybe two hundred. He was open to it. He was open to anything that involved living and having the chance to improve his life and the lives of those around him, which only gave him more of an eagerness to get the party started.

He scratched his lower leg and felt his fingernail burrow into a deep wound, albeit one that was covered by one of Aunt Kitty's bandages. His injuries weren't close to healing, and his weakness was palpable. Looking at his frame, he guessed he had lost fifty or sixty pounds, maybe more. He was a mere skeleton of what he used to be.

But he was alive. And for now, that was all that mattered. And it was all because of Aunt Kitty.

The door to his room creaked open. "So Rip Van Winkle decided to wake up finally." Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with a black kitten on it, Aunt Kitty waltzed in with a warm smile on her face and a tray in her hands. "How did you sleep?"

"Best few hours of sleep I've ever had. Thank you." Kyle used his arms to push himself up in the bed, but his shoulder gave out and he dropped back to the mattress. "Crap. I hardly have any strength in my entire arm." He tried lifting it in front of him, and it went about six inches before he winced and the limb collapsed.

"Not unexpected given the horror you went through. Let me help you." She placed the pewter tray on the marble-top chest and moved to his side. She probably didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, and he was concerned about her ability to help in the strength department.

She crouched lower, curled her arm inside his armpit, and locked it on the other side. "You ready?"

"Yeah."

She counted to three and then used her legs to pull him up a good couple of feet. Then, before letting go, she gingerly tucked pillows behind his back. He cried out.

"Sorry about that. I know you have some rather bad welts, but there was no other option. Either lay you on your front or your back, unless you know how to suspend yourself in the air." She winked at him, and for the first time, he noticed piercing, blue eyes. Sure, she had a head full of silver hair and more lines on her face than he could count, but he could see that a few years ago she had been beautiful...radiant even. And when mixed with her compassion and remarkable kindness, she scored a ten in his book.

"I'm good. Thanks for the help. Do you have a little breakfast there?" He nodded at the tray and rubbed his hands together as his stomach growled loudly. "Sorry, I think I'm still trying to replenish my body."

She pulled a rolling tray from the corner and moved it in front of Kyle, then placed his food on top, just as if he were at a hospital. “By the looks of how your clothes hang off your frame, it’s a wonder you can sit up or even walk. You’re one lucky guy, Kyle Spencer.”

He smiled, then bit into a piece of bacon, savoring every chew like it was a gifted treasure. Something gnawed at the back of his mind and he couldn’t place it. Was it something she had just said, or the way she said it?

He didn’t have the brainpower to figure it out. He used a spoon to scoop up scrambled eggs and ate three bites before breathing. “Cheese?” he asked.

“Of course. They’re better that way.”

She milled about the room, then pulled out a pair of blue rubber gloves and wedged her fingers inside before picking up the remnants of the triage scene from earlier. He was shocked to see so many bloody gauze pads, rags, and towels. She placed all the painful reminders of his captivity into a clear, plastic bag and tied it up. She tossed it in the hallway. “I’ll take that outside later. But it’s good to put that in your rearview mirror, I bet.”

He was in the middle of gulping down a full glass of orange juice. “Uh, yeah,” he said, wiping his forearm across his face.” He stared at his bandaged fingers and recalled the splinters digging under his fingernails. He knew it was self-induced pain, and it had been necessary. Still, it stung.

“Do you think I need antibiotics? Actually, a tetanus shot might be required. I don’t know. Are we going to the doctor soon?”

“Oh, one thing at a time, Kyle. Sleep and food are the best healers in the world. Well, except when you pull or strain a muscle, and then ice is best.”

He nodded and strained to listen for other voices out in the hall or beyond. “Is anyone else staying here at your bed and breakfast right now?”

“Just had two couples leave yesterday. Expecting a small family and two more couples tomorrow though. Why do you ask?” She continued tidying up the room, ensuring every last item was placed in the right spot. She adjusted a mirror a couple of inches to the right, moved two hardbacks to an upright position to rest against a small grandfather clock, and then she checked each of the drawers. He couldn’t figure what that was all about.

“Just wondering if anyone was around. I don’t want to pull you away from your paying customers.”

She swatted a hand in front of her face. “Ah, it’s nothing. I tend to jump in and help those in need. Part of my DNA, I suppose.”

She twisted her head around and looked at his empty plate. “Looks like you’ve already finished your breakfast. I’m guessing you’d like seconds,” she said, lifting his tray from the stand.

Kyle couldn’t hide his smile, then he tried to inch up. “What can I say? You’re a great cook, just like my mom. At least when I was younger.”

She stopped halfway to the door and turned around with a serious, caring look on her face. “Did something happen to your mom?”

“Well...” He mulled over how to word this, then a cough escaped his lips.

“My dad played the corporate bullshit game—I mean, corporate brown-nosing game—and moved his way up to CEO. As they got more money, they became more distant. Yep, they’re actually pretty loaded. I guess most people would say they’re pretty lucky.”

She raised a single eyebrow. “Yes, lucky them.”

“That reminds me, I’d love to give them a call, and let them know how I’m doing. Maybe they’ll let me charter a plane to get back home. Do you have a phone I can borrow?”

“All in due time, Kyle. I’m not a great multitasker. How about we work on breakfast first, then figure out our next steps?”

He didn’t fully understand how this was some type of complex event. She could toss him the phone from the doorway. But she was being nice and helpful, so he went with it. “I’m cool. Just enjoying every minute right now.”

She winked again and left the room, closing the door behind her. A moment later, he heard pots and pans clanking and the sound of rushing water. It didn’t take long for him to get the urge to pee. He tried using his one half-good arm to push himself upward, but it wasn’t very effective, and all he did was end up moving his pillow out from behind his neck, rubbing against some of his wounds.

“Dammit,” he said, then he recalled his vow to not cuss. He couldn’t move his feet much, if at all, anyway, so he’d probably need some help getting to the bathroom. Using the thumb and forefinger of his good hand, he fidgeted with the tag from his coverlet, anything to take his mind off peeing.

He glanced at the grandfather clock and quickly realized that while the pendulum was swinging, the time wasn’t changing. He wasn’t certain how much time had ticked by, but it seemed like an hour. He couldn’t stand it any longer. He had to get to the bathroom.

He peeled back the covers and noticed he was not wearing his own clothes. He’d forgotten that he had changed. The shorts looked like something his dad might have worn thirty years ago, and the T-shirt had a faded logo on the front. He tried to ignore the unsightly vision of his mauled legs. Using his arm for support, he gingerly brought one of his legs to the side of the bed. It took several seconds, and when he had finished just that small task, he could feel a line of perspiration down the center of his back.

“This might take a while,” he mumbled.

He huffed out a couple of breaths, pulling from his energy reserves, then grabbed hold of his other leg.

The door swung open.

“And where do you think you’re going?” Aunt Kitty said, eyeing him up and down.

“The bathroom. I need to pee. Bad.” He gave her a toothy grin.

She released a high-pitched cackle. “That’s a good sign. Internal injuries are probably minor if you can still poop and pee, I’ve always said.”

He was prepared for her to walk to his side and help him off the bed, but

she stopped at his dangling leg, picked it up with both hands, and placed it back on the mattress. “There. Need to make sure you don’t hurt yourself. Too soon to be up and around. Way too soon, as a matter of fact.”

He could feel the skin between his eyes scrunch together. “What? I know it won’t be easy, but I’ve got to pee. Seriously.”

She stopped in her tracks. “Seriously? You think I’m not taking this seriously?”

For the first time he felt...what was it? Her resentment, or that he owed her something in return?

“No, you’re taking it the wrong way. I truly appreciate everything you’ve done for me. It’s something I’ll never forget, Aunt Kitty. But I know this isn’t easy on you. As soon as we reach my parents, they can pay you a nice bonus for being my savior.” He smiled to emphasize his sincerity.

Her lips drew a straight line, then she turned back to the door, muttering something under her breath. He turned his head, thinking he might have heard her say something like, “We’ll see just how big of a bonus we get.”

He decided to ask her. “Did you say something to me?”

“Let me get your breakfast,” she said just before the door slammed behind her.

Kyle felt his chest tighten, and he did everything he could to keep his pulse from racing out of control. He knew his fear radar was overly sensitive right now. Everyone had a quirk or two, and Aunt Kitty wasn’t any different, he suspected.

He tried to situate himself back in bed as he rethought his strategy on getting to the bathroom. The rush of anxiety had temporarily diminished his urge to pee. The door swung open, and his heart jumped a beat. She was carrying a tray, and he immediately felt more at ease. She rounded the bed and set the tray on the table.

“Seconds, just like you asked,” she said. She pushed the table closer, but not with the detailed care she had used earlier.

His hunger had subsided, but he wanted to keep her spirits positive. “Uh, thank you.”

She didn’t say a word in response and walked out the door, this time without shutting it. The last thing he wanted to do was offend her, so he pulled the portable tray closer and took a bite of his toast. She came right back in the room, holding something in her hand.

“Here, use this if you can’t hold it.” She tossed something rubbery on his lap. He held it up. It looked like a ribbed miniature wine bottle with an elongated neck, a greenish-gray color.

“What is this?”

“We call it the Texas catheter.”

“What the—?”

“You’re resourceful.” She winked, but it wasn’t nearly as sweet. In fact, it seemed like she was mocking him.

“What if I need to go number two?”

“Not fun. But I’ve changed many a set of sheets in my days on the floor. What’s another set?” She tapped his shoulder, then turned to walk away.

“But can you just help me to the bathroom? And I’d like to go ahead and borrow your phone and make a couple of calls.” He could feel his pulse ticking a little faster, his breathing shallow.

Turning from the doorway, she approached the bed and grabbed a strap he hadn’t noticed before. Then she went to the other side and pulled up another strap. Before he could comment, query, or object, she had both straps pulled across his thighs and clasped together. Tightly.

He winced, hissing air through his teeth. “Ouch. That hurts.”

“Don’t want you falling out of bed.”

“I think you’re cutting off my blood flow.”

“Less to clean up afterward,” she said and winked again.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Finish your breakfast,” she said, gliding out of the room, the door partially shut.

He just sat there, dumbfounded by the turn of events, the turn of Aunt Kitty into a woman with some type of obsession issues. Even with the homey atmosphere, medical attention, and food and water, she was literally trying to keep him here against his will.

A wave of emotion tugged at him, and he fought to hold back tears...and rage. He’d be damned if anyone was going to hold that kind of power over him again in his life. He tossed the piece of toast on the tray, shoved it to the side, and tried his best to unclasp the metal clip that bit into the straps. He tried for five minutes and nothing budged. Drenching with sweat, he came to the conclusion he had the strength of a four-year-old.

He wiped his face, and then he looked up to see Aunt Kitty’s face poking just inside the door.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Kyle has a visitor.”

Suddenly his energy spiked, and a smile stretched across his face. Was it his buddies, Trent and Ryan, maybe his mom or dad?

“Who, tell me who?”

She kicked open the door, and in walked the wiry man with the thin goatee, the man who had held a gun to his head, the man who had sent him off to his torturous exile.

And as the man stood in his room and chuckled, Kyle could only cry like a little boy who knew he’d never see his parents again.

Damn, I missed Ezzy. That was my simple, yet most prevailing thought as Archie and I sat half a block down from Ricardo Bolivar's house on the outskirts of Brownsville, a few thin morning clouds giving way to a blue sky and a relentless sun. Since we were farther inland, the highs were again expected to be over a hundred. Couldn't recall if the forecast said 101 or 105 degrees. It didn't really matter. At triple digits, counting the notches was pointless.

Thinking of Ezzy made me smile. She was a salt-of-the-earth kind of gal and had been my rock for as long as I could recall. She represented good, normal people doing the right thing, as opposed to demented screw-ups who demanded my time and attention in my professional life.

Focusing on our suspect's neighborhood, it was decent enough, but certainly nothing fancy. Unlike three other areas we had passed while traveling west on Highway 48—where countless front yards had been turned into long-term mechanic stations for the ancient trucks put up on blocks—Bolivar's neighborhood must have one of those oppressive homeowner's associations. Everything was uniform, including the structures, all fitting into one of four layouts and one of four brick colors, as well as each having a lawn of mostly grass and at least a single tree and a handful of shrubs. Water shortage was a way of life in the Valley, yet these postcard views included greenery in the front.

Bolivar's rusted Monte Carlo sat in the front drive, flanked by two plastic garbage bins, one for trash, one for recyclables. Very standard, very responsible.

Nudging an inch to my right to avoid the sun cutting across the bucket seat in Archie's car, I sipped my not-so-delicious morning coffee. We had been in a hurry and could find nothing better than a gas station where the clerk offered us two choices of so-called fresh coffee. I probably should have opted for my college caffeine selection—straight-up soda.

Archie had an earbud in one ear and was grooving to some type of 1970s disco tune—Earth, Wind and Fire possibly? Was this a new morning ritual for Archie? Disco? I hadn't seen this part of him before. Whatever. He could have been practicing Zen meditation, for all I cared. I just felt lucky to have a few moments of peace, given the roller coaster I'd been on over the last twelve hours.

Three houses down from Bolivar's house, a man with a computer bag draped over his shoulder walked out his front door, tossed the morning paper onto the front porch, and then got into his car, a five-or six-year-old Nissan, blue. As he pulled out of the driveway and approached our location in ultra-low speed, he lowered his visor to block the sun's rays. I noticed a baby tire

on the front right side.

“Not exactly a hot spot of action,” I said, forgetting for a second that Archie had yet to start his typical Archie-isms. He held up a finger, and then went back to shaking his head and grooving.

I released a yawn and attempted to get the kinks out of my shoulder by pulling an arm over my head and leaning to my right. The Camaro’s restrictive space didn’t allow for a full stretch, but I did the best I could. Unfortunately, my best hadn’t been good enough to keep Dad in the hospital or to get him and Carly to open up about what the hell was going on.

But Dad’s last words before he finished his hospital escape earlier had sent shivers up my spine. He had finally admitted, or at least hinted, to being in a situation that was stressful. While still defiantly proud, his eyes gave a hint of vulnerability and even fright when he spoke: *“I got myself into this mess, and I’ll get myself out, Alex. Don’t worry. I’m a proud man. I can’t rely on my daughter to rescue me every time I get into trouble.”*

For sixty seconds after he had pulled away, I had paced the sidewalk outside of the hospital, trying desperately to reach Dad on his cell. With each call that rolled to voicemail, I could feel my emotions boiling, my tense jaw almost quivering from intense pressure, and tears pooling in my eyes. People treating me like I wasn’t there was a sore spot with me, which only added to my frustrations.

After considering throwing my phone out into the barren parking lot, I leaned on my knees and took in a few deep breaths. I knew nothing would be accomplished if I didn’t calm down and logically assess my next steps. I noticed I hadn’t received a text message from the Boston team, so I called each personally to join a conference line. Surprisingly, Nick was the only one awake and, in fact, had just come back inside after an early-morning workout. I was shocked, considering the extra weight he had been carrying around, thanks to his bad knee. He sounded alert and full of energy.

Finally the others joined the call. The moment I heard Brad’s voice, I wanted to let it all out, to share everything I was feeling, and not just the facts of this case. Even more, I wanted to feel his embrace against my body, to know I wasn’t alone in the world. But I couldn’t. Nick and Gretchen were already hurling question after question at me.

“I don’t know the simplest way to answer your questions. That’s why I’m calling you guys.”

Nick took the lead. “So, start with how this second drive-by shooting unfolded. I need to hear all the details.”

My partner sounded like I usually did when investigating a case—on point and determined. It was just what I needed. Someone pressing to get to the details without being as emotionally invested, or drained, as I was. I started to describe the moment when I leaped over the bushes and found Carly just standing next to the shot-up car and Dad lying in a pool of blood.

“No, before that,” Nick insisted. “I want to hear exactly what was going

on before your Dad and Carly left the beach. Did they make any calls? How was their interaction with you, the kids, and Archie? From what you said, given your earlier confrontation at their house, it was a little tense or awkward. But I need to hear you describe it in detail.”

I huffed out a breath, then did as he said. When I was finished, Gretchen chimed in. “I don’t know how you do it, Alex. To put up with someone sabotaging your dad’s life. I don’t know how you’ve been able to hold back with this woman.”

“Honestly, she almost had me convinced a few times that I was the problem. But then we had another shooting, and Dad was a half inch away from becoming a human vegetable, or worse, and then it became all too clear: I’d been played.”

“Absolutely,” Gretchen said with provocation. “Reminds me of the shysters running around New England...the gypsies or whatever you want to call them. They prey on the weak or weak-minded, try to make you feel sorry for them. You fork over five grand to have your driveway paved, and then the frickin’ driveway starts to crumble a month later.”

No one said a word for at least ten seconds. “Sounds like you have some personal demons of your own,” I said.

“It’s my parents. A couple of honest, hardworking Americans who try to do the right thing, treat everyone with respect. They don’t have a hateful or bigoted bone in their bodies. But they got royally screwed in this paving scam, and now this gypsy fella won’t return their calls. My parents might live in Connecticut, but they don’t have money growing on trees. It’s just really stressing them out. Me too, I guess.”

“When I’m back in the city, Gretchen, we’ll have to make it a girls’ night out. Maybe there is something we can do legally against these shysters, as you called them.”

“Cool.”

Assertive Nick got us back on track. “Ladies, that’s all well and good, but, Alex, you mentioned your dad seemed to show some attitude toward this captain?”

“Captain Rex. No idea if he’s really a captain. In fact, I probably doubt it. He’s just one of those characters who’s always around. In some respects, I think he’s lost his marbles. He’s searching for some sort of lost treasure. He thinks one of the robbers from the Brinks robbery in Boston back in the mid-1900s ended up on the Texas coast and might have buried a million dollars in precious coins or gold. Just repeating his theory makes it sound even more like nonsense.”

“And your dad wouldn’t say what his beef was with him?”

“Never got the chance to ask, although his rudeness was embarrassing. I think the kids noticed too. It just adds another layer of regret for coming back here. And that doesn’t begin to address the fact that my kids were exposed to two drive-by shootings.” I released a tired, annoyed breath.

“Take it easy on yourself,” Brad said. “You couldn’t have known all this was going to happen.”

“But my dad has been a walking soap opera, train wreck—whatever you want to call it—ever since my mom died. I should have known. But no, I pushed the negative stuff out of my head and thought he would be different. At first it seemed that way, but now look at everything. There is some serious shit going on down here, and he’s right in the middle of it. I know this from firsthand experience in the past.”

“Alex, you’re not a mind reader. You tried to see the best in your dad. That’s normal. I just wish I was there to...”

Hold you. That was what Brad almost said, but he didn’t finish his thought, and we all shared another moment of silence. I really couldn’t deal with interoffice gossip about me and Brad right now, even if I was fifteen hundred miles away.

Thankfully, Nick stayed focused on the case and at least pretended he hadn’t heard Brad’s comment. “Normally, I’d blow off this Captain Rex guy. But your dad’s reaction to him makes me pause. Gretchen, can—”

“I’ve already started the search.”

“Nice. Thanks. Do we even know his full name?” I tried to recall if I’d ever heard a last name. “I don’t think he told me. So, it will take some digging.”

“I’ve been dealt a worse hand, so I’ll figure it out.”

I could hear her nails clipping the keyboard at a breakneck pace.

“By the way, he said he was writing a book about this mystery of the stolen treasure,” I said. “Not sure if I believe it. Just sounded like a bullshit story so he would have an excuse to walk around the beach all day with his metal detector to find money people probably dropped out of their pockets. Yeah, I guess he could be another version of the gypsies up north.”

“So, to level set...” Nick said. “We still have a few feelers out for Carly and Bolivar. There could be a connection between what we once thought were two separate cases. This kidnapping, the shootings are possibly tied to drug cartels. Too much coincidence. Carly and Bolivar. We know they were at rehab at the same time.”

“Right, we just can’t go back in time and set up surveillance to record any of their discussions,” Brad said.

“Time travel would solve more than a few issues,” I admitted.

“Sometimes, it can create more issues than good, from what I’ve read in this novel I just bought,” Gretchen added.

“I know you’re just joking about time travel; obviously, we can’t undo our past actions,” Nick said. “But we *can* go with what we’ve got and try to make the next decision our best one.”

Hearing Nick as the voice of reason was surreal. But I was grateful for it, since I knew I was off my game.

With everyone in agreement on next steps, I disconnected the call and

rang Raul's number. He picked up on the second ring. I didn't waste time. I unloaded everything that had happened and everything I knew in a few minutes. Then I heard a toddler's voice.

"Sorry to interrupt Daddy time."

"It's okay. I'm used to walking around with one on my hip and the other tugging on my shirt," he said. "Give me one second." A moment later, I heard loud metal banging.

"What in the world is that?"

"I opened the cabinets and let the kids dump all the pans on the floor and bang wooden spoons against the sides. You should see the smiles on their faces. It works every time."

I couldn't help but smile. I recalled Erin and Luke doing the same thing. Boy, life had changed a lot in the last fifteen years since Erin was born.

"So what are your thoughts?" I asked bluntly.

"I need to find Carly and bring her in for questioning. I think now is the time to put some formal pressure on her. You don't mind, do you?"

"Hell no. I applaud it. Nothing else is working. Do anything you can to get her to open up. And I mean *anything*."

"Legally, of course," he said with a slight chuckle.

"Finding her might be the most difficult part. She didn't say where she was going, and I doubt it was home."

I then pressed him to tell me the name of his contact who had gotten him the intel on Powder Man, a.k.a. Ricardo Bolivar.

"Can't tell you. Won't tell you. And I say that in the nicest way."

I knew he was being cheeky, yet also straightforward. "I need to talk to this agent of yours, to learn more about Bolivar and what he's tied to."

"Alex, you know how dangerous these undercover ops are. I can't put his life at risk. Even though I know you're good, it's just not the right thing to do. And there's no way in hell you could reach out to him anyway. He has one handler, and that's me. If anyone else contacts him, he's to assume it's a setup. But this Bolivar connection is a strong one, I will say that. He's now in the crosshairs of our investigation."

I felt comforted, but also put off. Or was I just tired and frustrated? I asked Raul to let me know what he got out of Carly, and anything else his agent might have to share on Bolivar. What I failed to tell him was my next move—call Archie and start tracking Bolivar ourselves.

Archie snickered and I followed his gaze to a house across the street from Bolivar's. A woman in curlers and some type of white face paint was shaking a finger and yelling at a girl half her age. The girl stomped her sandaled feet on the concrete, right next to a secondhand car.

"A mother/daughter dust-up," he said way too loudly since he couldn't hear himself over the music. Then he gave me the thumbs-up, as if to say,

Lucky you.

Erin and I had our moments, but all in all, we were dealing with it, making a few strides along the way. This morning had been one of our more mature interactions when I asked her to ensure that she and Luke got along while they hung out with Teresa for most of the day. Oh...Teresa. My heart felt nearly broken for my friend. As the early morning sun had glittered off her million-dollar pool, we both shed tears as she spoke about her daughter Jessica. She was killed by a drunk driver. Teresa initially tried to put up a good front, but it didn't take long for the floodgates to open, and then she crumpled into my arms. She had shown she could bounce back, make something of herself professionally, but I knew we all had our breaking points. I had been pulled into that deep, dark hole a few months back when Mark was murdered, and then the aftermath of dealing with anger, blame, guilt...every emotion a person could feel. But I hadn't lost my child.

"What kept you going?" I'd asked her as she wiped mascara off her face.

"Corey. He's the only thing that got me out of bed. He was suffering too, and I couldn't ignore it, even if I was grieving."

I gave her another hug, then we shared an orange juice together. If it had been at night, we probably would have spiked it with some vodka, but I had told her about the work I had to focus on today. I didn't want to give her the details, but she knew it had to do with Carly and Archie's case. And then she'd offered to watch after Luke and Erin, admitting she could use a couple of assistants. I'd spoken privately to both Luke and Erin, and they were cool with the arrangement, at least for one day.

Archie and I watched the younger girl get in her car and drive off, and he finally removed his earbud.

"Done with the Zen music?"

"It was Beyonce, thank you very much."

I nearly snorted coffee out of my nose.

"Don't laugh. That woman can bring it. Whoa," he said, and his eyes got all dreamy. He was in some type of fantasy state of mind.

I slurped another mouthful of sludgy coffee. As I placed the Styrofoam cup in the holder, Archie inched up in his seat. "Check it out," he said.

An older model Jeep, gray with a black soft-top, pulled up to Bolivar's house. The glare and angle of the sun made the driver impossible to see. Powder Man exited his house wearing high-tops, jean shorts, and another T-shirt that looked like a hand-me-down from when he was fifteen. A manila folder was tucked under his arm. Before he got to the car, he picked up his newspaper and tossed it on his porch.

A few seconds later, the car drove right by us as Archie and I slunk lower in our seats. "Did you get a visual?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Plates?"

"Nope."

“Dammit. Let’s follow, but keep your distance. Don’t want to spook them.”

Once the Jeep had turned out of the neighborhood, Archie turned around and then caught up to them on the main road.

“Not so close,” I said.

“I’m not. There are five cars between us and them.”

“I know, but you’re too obvious. Be more casual about it.”

“Casual in a car?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Uh, yeah. Whatever you say, Alex.”

We finally reached a red light, but were just two cars back in an adjoining lane. As the Jeep took off, I was able to read the plates. I quickly sent off a group text to the Boston team with the new information.

Suddenly, the Jeep made a quick turn across our lane, and Archie had to slam the brakes to avoid a wreck.

“I guess they’re hungry,” he said.

Bolivar and his new driver had pulled into a McDonald’s. They went through the drive-thru as we huddled in another parking lot next door. They pulled out and continued their trek.

“Now you need to be really casual since they might have seen you earlier.”

“Right. Casual.”

I tried to get a look at the driver as they pulled out onto the main drag, but I was blocked by Bolivar’s ugly mug.

Ten minutes later, we drove east on Boca Chica Boulevard headed for downtown Brownsville, just a few blocks from the café where we’d seen Bolivar the last time. “Wonder if they’ll stop at the café again,” I said.

We then took a brief tour of Brownsville, passing by the Gladys Porter Zoo, the Children’s Museum, Sams Memorial Stadium, a funeral home, and a couple of schools. After twenty minutes of meandering through town in no discernible pattern, we turned onto East 6th Street and watched the Jeep pull to a stop in front of that same café.

“Wonder if they thought they were being followed?” I asked rhetorically.

Bolivar got out of the car, and the driver stayed put with the engine running. Folder in hand, Bolivar walked inside. In less than a minute, he walked back out, holding nothing.

“Something is going on inside that café,” I said.

“Seems that way. You going to ask Gretchen and Brad to look into it?”

I was already tapping the text into my phone, and I could feel Archie’s eyes on me. “Don’t lose them.”

“Right. On it.” He gently released the brake, and we angled back onto the road. “They just made a quick left,” he said.

I lifted my eyes. “Okay, follow, but—”

“Casual, I remember. Shit, woman, you’re a broken record.”

I smacked the center console. “Archie, he’s braking. Crap, they might have spotted us.”

“What do I do?” he said with panic in his voice. The Jeep had pulled to the side of the road.

“Turn left just past them, and I’ll point that way. We’re stupid tourists and can’t figure out where we’re going.”

Archie motored past them and turned on his blinker while I pointed. “I’m pretty sure I saw Bolivar on his phone,” he said.

I nodded. “Just keep going, then let’s circle back and try to find a side road from where we can watch them and see where they go next.”

Once out of sight from Bolivar and his driving partner, Archie maneuvered the Camaro with precision, cutting across a couple of business parking lots, down a residential street, and then found an uninhabited side street that would provide us a view of where Bolivar had sat in the Jeep five minutes prior. Archie parked the car between an unmanned backhoe and an overflowing dumpster. We walked the last fifty yards on foot—just a couple of tourists wasting the day away. “Nice and slow,” I said, hooking my arm around Archie’s. “We’re on vacation.”

He did a double take at my arm.

“Don’t get used to it,” I said.

“I...uh, don’t know how to tell you this in a professional way,” he said with unblinking eyes and his mouth hanging open.

“I didn’t know ‘professional’ was an option with you. Spit it out. We’re almost to the point where they could see us.”

“I’m kind of excited.”

“What?” I refused to look down. Almost without thinking, I reached up, grabbed his nipple, and turned my wrist until he yelped.

“What the fuck, Alex? I think you ripped it off my chest.”

“Did that change your blood flow at all?”

He groaned. “I think I’m bleeding through my nipple. Dammit, Alex, you have no idea how strong your hands are.”

I smiled, and he stopped groping his chest by the time we reached the main street. The Jeep was gone.

“Where did he go?” Archie said under his breath.

We crossed the street and pretended to window shop while pointing at a store for expectant mothers. “Pink or blue?” Archie asked.

“What?”

“Are we having a boy or girl, you know, just in case someone asks? Gotta stay in character.”

I did what kept me sane and ignored the blowhard, then took the opportunity to peer down the street. Among the many cars and trucks parked along the side, I spotted the Jeep. It looked to be empty, at least as far as I could tell from my vantage point.

“I see the Jeep, but I can’t tell what business it’s parked in front of. Can

you?"

"I see a black sign with white lettering swinging on a bar. Starts with an A, and there are maybe three or four words. I think I need glasses." He wiped his eyes. "I guess you can't make out the sign either?"

"You're taller, have a better angle," I said, actually believing myself.

He craned his neck and took a step in that direction, but I jerked his arm back. His neck snapped like a wet towel. "We're looking at baby stuff, remember?"

"Okay, okay." He looked through the window for a few seconds. "Do you want to go to the optometrist together?"

"I can see just fine, thank you."

"I think time is catching up to you, Alex. I've recently noticed a few new lines at the side of your eyes."

I reached up and touched my face.

"Gotcha," he said with a wide grin. "You still look as fine as ever."

"Excuse me?"

"Fine as in just fine, no aging issues whatsoever."

My eyes spotted an alley running behind the row of businesses. "Let's head this way."

Archie stayed at my side as we casually walked down the street perpendicular to the one where the Jeep sat. Then we walked across the street and cut into the alley, hoping we might be able to sneak a peek into the business where Bolivar had likely entered. That was when I pushed Archie to the side and kept walking.

"What did I do?" he whined.

I swatted at him to hush as we walked heel to toe down the alley. Like most alleys, it wasn't clean, and it smelled like garbage. I watched for signs, mainly one that started with an A about halfway down or so, and people. Fifty feet in, I'd yet to spot anything living, if I were to eliminate mold from the list. I passed a dumpster, Archie right on my heels. Out of nowhere, a bird's wings fluttered just behind us, and Archie swung around so fast he tripped and fell to his knees on the filthy concrete. "Damn bird. About gave me a heart attack."

He tried to quickly jump back to his feet, but he slipped and hit the ground again, this time landing on his shoulder. "Ooh!" he yelled out.

I walked over and held out my hand. He took hold, and I angled my body backward to counterbalance his weight. Just then, a door swung open about twenty feet down the alley. A man walked out carrying a small plastic bag, the bottom half of the translucent bag coated in red.

Our eyes met at the same time. It was Mario. My breath caught in my throat. I heard Archie grunt, and then I realized I'd let go of his hand.

"Give me your gun," I said to Archie.

Mario ceased movement, other than to look at Archie and then at me. His eyes were the same as they were twenty years earlier. A few creases around

his mouth, but he looked solid, like he could take someone down in a heartbeat.

“Holy shit, a rat!” Archie lunged away from me.

I kept my gaze on Mario, my voice urgent. “Stop screwing around, Archie. Give me your gun. Now.”

Mario brought a finger to his mouth. Was he trying to keep me quiet?

I heard him rustling across the ground. “Get this fucking rat away from me. He’s chasing me, dammit.”

Mario shook his head. What was he trying to tell me? Then he slowly took two steps toward me while holding up a hand, as if letting me know he wasn’t a danger to me. I glanced down at the alley floor, searching for Archie’s gun.

“Who is that?” Archie asked, finally paying attention but still scrambling along the filthy ground. “I can’t find my gun.”

I heard the crunching of pebbles underfoot, and I locked eyes with Mario again. “You need to stop where you are and get down on the ground.” My voice was firm, but he kept taking small steps forward.

“Archie, you got your cuffs on you?”

“They were just right here in my boot, hold on,” he said with a grunt, wiggling on the ground even more.

I didn’t see any noticeable weapons on Mario, but I knew that didn’t mean a damn thing. He could have a pistol tucked anywhere, or even a shank of some kind. Then my eyes were drawn to the bag. It was transparent. Blood-soaked gauze and a towel were inside the bag. I could feel my pulse leap into another stratosphere.

“What have you done?” I asked as oxygen flooded my brain.

Two more steps.

I held up a hand. “Stop where you are! Archie...?”

“Fuck. Shit,” was all he could say.

Mario looked over his shoulder toward the open door, then glanced back at me and held his finger up to his mouth again. Someone else was inside—someone Mario didn’t want to hear our conversation, as one-sided as it had been. He shifted his smoldering eyes toward the dumpster, then tossed the bag inside. A few flies buzzed around. He then started backing up to the door.

“Dammit, there it is. Here you go, Alex.”

Still scrambling to get to his feet, Archie placed the gun in the palm of my hand with Mario two steps away from the door. I brought the pistol up and aimed. “Stop, Mario. I’m not fucking around.”

He paused for a moment, perhaps wondering if I had the balls to shoot another human. Given what I had seen in that bag, I knew he had hurt someone. But had he killed a person?

I blinked and exhaled, steadying my nerves.

He swallowed once, then slowly brought his hand up to the side of his face with his thumb and pinkie extended. That was the sign that he would call

me. I turned my head, somewhat confused by this signal and his lack of speaking, not to mention that there was no way he knew my number. Then he gave me a single nod, the look in his eyes serious, but...kind. I'd seen that look before. Was he trying to charm me like I was seventeen? Or was it a look inside the real Mario, and he wanted me to trust him?

"Shoot the fucker," Archie said.

"Shut up, Archie."

"Or not. Your choice."

Mario dipped inside and slowly shut the door behind him. Archie pawed at me while trying to get to his feet.

"What's going on, Alex?"

"It was Mario."

"Your old high school flame? I guess we know who's still dick-whipped," he said.

I slowly turned my gaze to Archie. He held up both of his hands. Before I could say a word about the confusion I felt, my phone buzzed inside my pocket. I handed Archie the gun, pulled out my phone, and eyed the screen. It was Erin. Great timing. Was she calling to complain about her brother sticking his wet finger in her ear?

I spotted a sign above the back door. It read Aunt Kitty's B&B. I pointed it out to Archie as I tapped the green button on my screen.

"Yes, dear. Tell me—"

"Help us, Mom. Help!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. She sounded completely out of control.

"Erin, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Ter—"

"What, Erin. Tell me!"

"Teresa. Someone just shot her in the head, and I have her blood all over me!"

With the phone at my ear, I ran like a woman possessed back to the car.

I watched Luke lean down and run his hand through the fountain water in the lobby of the Harlingen International Airport. Normally, I would have kindly asked him not to do that, which would have then initiated a cat-and-mouse game that would have gone on for ten or fifteen minutes.

But on a day where he witnessed a woman, my friend Teresa, being murdered just a few feet from where he'd been sitting, it mattered not one bit. Anything to divert his emotions and help him feel alive.

"Mom, he'll be okay. We're kids. We bounce back quicker than you think." Wise words from young lady Erin, who peeked up from leaning her head against my shoulder and forced out a smile. I brushed my fingers along her cheek and moved a few strands of loose hair out of her beautiful face.

"Just know how sorry I am that I let this happen to you guys." A tear bubbled in my eyes. The kids had lost their dad earlier in the year, and it wasn't by natural causes. But to witness a murder that close up, and for Erin to have Teresa's blood sprayed on her...it was all just so heinous. The violence, the half-truths and bold-faced lies, and even the posturing of certain people, had led to this. I ached from the inside out for Luke and Erin. And for Corey, who had cried on my shoulder when I told him the news.

For Teresa, I knew I wouldn't sleep—couldn't sleep—until we caught the assholes who were responsible. My gut told me she was somehow caught in the same bloody web of drugs, kidnappings, extortion, murder—she fit in there somewhere. How exactly, I had no clue.

I glanced at the people riding the down escalator, thinking I recognized a familiar face, but I was wrong. It was a young man followed by a little boy, perhaps his son. The day had been draining and dizzying at the same time. We all had grieved and drawn strength from each other, for our love of each other. Even Archie came over to offer support in his own way, which mainly consisted of catering to our every whim and need. Then we got down to business. I set up a call with my Boston team and made sure Raul was included as well. In fact, I wouldn't let him leave Teresa's home office until he shared everything he knew—DEA rules be damned. New intel was shared, we came up with a plan, and then we reached out to other parties to ensure they were on board. As if they had another choice.

"It's Brad!" Luke yelled, and he took off for the escalator. I looked over and all I could see was Brad's dimpled smile as he skipped down the steps. Luke met him at the bottom. A quick high-five, then a hug. Brad rustled Luke's hair, then scanned the lobby. Erin and I walked in his direction.

We exchanged normal pleasantries, but I longed for him to hold me, to tell me everything was okay, even though I knew it wasn't.

"Mom, can I throw my change in the fountain?" Luke asked.

“Sure. Go help him, Erin,” I said.

Stepping to the side for a brief moment, Brad palmed my upper arm, and I tingled inside. He looked into my eyes.

“Sorry Luke and Erin had to deal with this shit, but I know that having you there made it bearable.”

“I don’t know. Not sure what the impact will be. Might need to put them in counseling.”

“Maybe, but for now they’ll be safe with me, and we’ll have some fun... get their minds off this crap.”

I leaned toward him, my breasts just brushing against his chest. I wanted to press him against my body. But now wasn’t the time for our inaugural public display of affection.

“Where’s my other half?” I asked, looking around for Nick.

“Had to take a leak. Should be coming down the escalator any second.”

Glancing around to ensure the kids were preoccupied by the fountain, I took the opportunity to take Brad’s hands in mine.

“I’d only trust a few people in this world with Luke and Erin.” I squeezed his hand and he reciprocated, his eyes boring holes into my soul...in a good way. “This isn’t part of your job description, so...thank you for doing this.” I thumbed a tear out of the corner of my eye.

“You couldn’t stop me from helping. I just—”

He glanced away for a second, then cleared his throat. I squeezed his hand a little tighter.

“I just want you to be safe.”

“Always.”

He raised an eyebrow, a slight grin forming at the edge of his soft lips.

“Okay, I know I sometimes take a risk here or there,” I conceded.

He winked at me. “I don’t want to change you. It’s who you are. Just know that there are young people,” he nodded toward the kids, “and some older ones, too, who care about you.” He paused for a second. “People who would do anything for you.”

I swallowed back more emotion and squeezed his hands.

“Hey, are you two going to kiss or something?”

We both turned to see Nick waving at us as he walked off the escalator. I quickly let go of Brad and shoved my hands in my front pockets. Something about my partner looked different...very different, which seemed odd, considering I’d seen him no more than a week earlier. He came right up and gave me a bear hug.

“How are the kids?” he asked, cinching a small bag over his shoulder.

“Eh. As good as can be expected.”

“I’m sure they’ll be in good hands with Brad. He’s practically a kid himself,” Nick joked, nudging Brad’s shoulder.

Brad flashed a smile and gave a thumbs-up. “You know it,” he said. I wondered if he ever got tired of being teased about his youthful looks and

demeanor.

"I know you'll fill me in on the details of the exchange in the car," Nick said.

"Were you able to secure the necessary logistical support?"

He grinned and patted his bag. "It was a frickin' miracle. I've never seen the FBI move so fast. Never. Probably had something to do with Jerry throwing his weight around."

Our affable boss, the supervisory special agent of the Violent Crimes Squad, carried considerable girth. I looked at Nick again.

"You lose weight? You're thinner through the face and you seem to be moving a lot better."

"Been working out for a good couple of months, but I guess you never noticed. Once this is over, we'll have to do a workout together. Maybe I'll school you."

"A challenge I'll gladly accept once we're on the other side and I'm reunited with the kids back home." I turned to see Erin and Luke approaching our group.

"Give me hugs." I took them both in my arms and kissed their heads and then their cheeks. Luke wiped his off. "Mom, I don't want to get on a plane with lipstick on my face. Gross."

"Off you go. I'll call you as soon as I book my flight." I stuck out my hand, and Brad grabbed my fingers until our arms were fully extended. Then he winked and guided the kids up the escalator.

Nick and I walked through the electric doors at the front of the airport and into the thick nighttime air. I looked up and saw nothing but stars.

"We better find a way to resolve this before I have to spend any amount of time in the Texas sun. With my red hair and pale skin, I'll burn in ten minutes. And I forgot to bring sunblock."

I paused before getting into my Camry. "It should all be over by morning, one way or the other."

I drove to the parking lot gate, rolled down the window, and handed four bucks to the pimple-faced kid in the attendant's booth. At the same time, Nick handed over my holster and my Glock 23. I locked in a round of ammunition, appreciating the weight of the pistol that felt like an extension of my hand. The kid's eyes went wide. Our timing couldn't have been worse. I turned to the kid and said, "We're FBI."

"Uh, okay," he said, his mouth still hanging open.

"What's your name?" I asked as Nick held up two sets of credentials, then placed a set in my hand.

"Danny."

"Satisfied, Danny?"

"Sure. I'll do whatever you want. If you're going to hold me hostage or something, I just need to be home by eight in the morning."

"We're with the FBI, Danny. We're not going to hold you hostage."

He nodded and gave me fifty cents in change.

Nick leaned across the seat. “Why do you need to be home by eight?”

“Thousands will be online to watch the battle of the century. It’s League of Legends.”

“Epic,” Nick said as I punched the gas, and we zipped out of the parking lot, heading east.

Removing the Snickers bar from its wrapper, I took a bite and exercised my jaw on the chewable candy bar.

"I haven't eaten processed sugar for the last seven weeks," Nick said into my ear.

I stopped my chewing for a brief second. "It's the first thing I've had to eat all day." I resumed chewing and then bit off another piece.

"I'm not giving you shit, just proud of what I've accomplished. I found willpower that I didn't know I had...well, not since I turned forty anyway."

Not a topic I wanted to discuss. I walked to the corner of the conference room, which made up about a third of the vacant office space. Raul had told me this was where he and his DEA team would occasionally perform surveillance, conduct off-site interviews, or even just gather to mentally prep before a potentially dangerous operation.

Angling my vision out one of the corner windows, I could see all the way to the edge of the bay water just next to the bridge. But my focus was on the lighthouse. "According to Dad, we should see something, or not, in three minutes."

Raul nodded and brought a pair of small binoculars to his face.

"Did you decide to put any of your team members around the lighthouse?"

"I could only use the personnel I absolutely trusted. And with the intel your buddy Archie gave us about the rave going on at the party house, I had to deploy three men as part of the catering company. Don't have enough good men and women to go around. Besides, the person in the lighthouse is probably a lackey. If we try to arrest him there, it might just expose us. I'm guessing he doesn't know much. Let's follow the game plan, at least for now."

Nick joined us in the corner as I continued munching on my candy bar.

"I heard you mention Archie," Nick said to Raul. "I thought he was supposed to meet us here."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?"

I checked my phone for any missed calls or text messages as Nick leaned over my shoulder.

"Nothing."

"It's a minute after," Nick said, shifting his eyes to me.

"Dad said ten...or so."

Nick gave me one of those looks. I knew what he was thinking. How could we trust the man who had lied to me repeatedly, committed federal felonies, and put his family at risk? Well, after essentially catching Dad in the act earlier—when he was transporting plastic-covered bricks of cocaine from

his boat to a waiting van—he had finally come clean about everything. I called Raul to meet me at Dad’s house, and we questioned my father for two solid hours, during which Carly had three emotional outbursts. Damn, that woman was a drama queen.

Without specifically calling out his girlfriend, Dad had been sucked into this drug-smuggling vortex because of her and her addiction—although it wasn’t her addiction to cocaine this time. Instead, it was money and all the related trappings. Initially, she’d found herself in debt, and who was there to help her out? Ricardo Bolivar, a.k.a. Powder Man, who befriended her during their court-mandated visits to their addiction support group. Initially, she ran drugs for Bolivar. But apparently that wasn’t good enough, for him or for her. Their partnership went deeper, and she was asked to cross the border and transport the drugs back into the US, usually by hiding them within secret compartments in the car he loaned her, and on at least one occasion, inside her person.

Apparently, that had been about the time she and Dad had started dating. And it didn’t take long for her to get her hooks into him. At least that was how I viewed it. He was vulnerable, lost, battling his own demons, so what better way to give him a purpose in life than to save the damsel in distress?

As Dad sat on the edge of the couch and told the story, with Carly sticking to him like Velcro, it had been difficult not to roll my eyes.

Dad had jumped in and tried to bail her out of debt, since she had gone on a spending spree that would put Imelda Marcos to shame. Bolivar, though, wasn’t stupid, so he’d made a proposal to Dad and Carly: help him move the drugs into the States using Dad’s fishing boat, and not only would he take care of all her debt, he would pay them ten thousand dollars for every successful delivery.

And that was when Carly the Spending Queen lost all semblance of self-control. They became stuck in a never-ending cycle of spending and then relying on their drug money to cover their debts. The shootings, my Dad believed, were related to a rival cartel challenging the one Bolivar was involved with, and they must have identified Carly when she went across the border. To end our discussion, he had said, “I know we were in denial, afraid to admit there was no way out. Russian roulette, that’s what it was. I’m so sorry, Alex.” The bags under his eyes sagged more than I’d ever seen.

I had to leave the room to keep from smacking him across the face. The shootings, Teresa’s death, even the kidnapping of that college boy that Archie was investigating, were all tied together. Dad had known it, or at least suspected it. He could have at least gone to the authorities sooner, before blood coated Port Isabel. He could have come to me. He said his pride got in the way. I told him, “Dad, you can’t give me that valiant pride bullshit. It was simply one thing: greed.”

I felt a nudge from my partner. “The lights.”

I focused my vision outside the window and watched the top of the tower

flash three times. That signaled the start of another drug-running cycle, according to my dad. But tonight, it also initiated a “go” on Nick’s mission.

Just then, Raul’s undercover agent entered the room, moving at a fast clip. Mario tapped his arm. “Chop, chop, team. We’ve got thirty minutes to reach the exchange location.”

I held my gaze for an extra second. While we’d spoken on the phone briefly earlier, this was our first time seeing each other without me believing he was a member of a drug cartel.

“You don’t mess around,” I said.

“Can’t. Not in my line of work.” He stopped and eyed me up and down, then gave me a brief smile.

I turned back to Nick. “Do you have your Thaddeus Spencer ID on you?”

He padded his back pocket.

“And of course the two million in cash.”

He pointed down at the bag Raul had provided, one that had a GPS chip embedded in the material. It connected to an application that we all had downloaded earlier, which gave us the location of the bag to within about a hundred feet.

“Hopefully, the GPS won’t let us down,” Raul said. “Or they won’t switch the money to a different bag.”

Mario took a step toward all of us. “Screw the money. We have to make this exchange cleanly so we can get that kid back. Bolivar worked him over again today, and Kyle is in bad shape.”

“And do we honestly think Bolivar will turn him over?” Nick asked.

“Given my knowledge of Bolivar, there are two million and one reasons. You know about the first two million in that bag. The last one has to do with his boss. Whenever Boss Man speaks, Bolivar jumps.”

Everyone nodded.

One of the main goals of this operation was to expose and take down the man at the top of the org chart. But Mario had yet to hear Ricardo Bolivar provide a name, referencing him only as “the boss” or “boss man.”

Raul and I agreed to keep comm lines open and to update each other as events took place throughout the night. The three of us left the office, Mario and Nick in the Jeep, and me in my rented Camry. Once Mario texted his drug-dealing buddy that he had Thaddeus, he was supposed to receive an updated exchange location. I gave them a two-minute start and followed their whereabouts on my phone.

Oddly, we didn’t go very far at all. I watched the blip on my app travel about four miles down the road. As I ran through a yellow light to stay close, I knew they had entered the parking lot of a supersized Walmart. Did they really want to execute this exchange in public?

I watched the app on my phone and saw that the Jeep went behind Walmart, where there were other buildings. Then it came to a stop. I did the same in front of Walmart and changed the view on my app from a map to an

overhead view, which showed actual images recently captured. Off a tree-covered, narrow road, there were a series of one-story industrial buildings. And then I remembered: those buildings had been there when I was a kid, prior to the construction of the Walmart strip center. There was a strong possibility the buildings were abandoned.

I glanced down and saw the blip stop about three-quarters of the way down the narrow road. I tapped the Camry's steering wheel, knowing I couldn't just drive down that one entry point, but I also knew I couldn't let Nick do this on his own. Mario was there, but he was supposedly undercover. Would he step in if things got rough, or would he hold back if he was outnumbered? I wasn't about to let my partner get taken hostage, or worse.

I accelerated out of my spot and circled the massive parking lot to reach the far side of the strip center, then parked there on the side, in the last designated space. I got out of the car and walked through the back parking lot, over a small retaining wall, and then through about a hundred feet of brush and trees that flanked the series of buildings for a good fifty feet or so. When I reached the back side of the industrial buildings, I found what I had hoped to find: a small walkway between buildings two and three. I pulled out my Glock and headed down the walkway, keeping my back to the building, flipping my head over my shoulder every few steps to ensure no one was sneaking up behind me. A few feet before the end, spears of light cut across the façade of the building opposite me, and I could hear voices.

"I have your money. All of it is in here," Nick said over the drone of car engines.

"Throw it this way," a man with a slight accent said.

I heard Nick's bag hit the ground.

"Where is Kyle?"

I heard some words in Spanish.

"Dear God, Kyle...my son," Nick said, playing the role of Kyle's dad well.

"Okay, Nick, just get him in the car and let's get out of here," I whispered to myself as I inched closer to the edge of the building, my pulse hammering in my neck. Leaning forward, I spotted the Jeep's headlights. I heard the shuffling of shoes on gravel.

"Is he even alive?"

I held my breath, wondering what Nick had seen. Or not seen. Regardless, he knew our mission was to get that kid in the car and get the hell out of Dodge in quick order. But something seemed to have yanked that directive from his brain.

"Fucking heathens." Nick's voice was softer.

I shifted another step closer until I could see the entire Jeep, then Mario standing next to it, his eyes focused on something in front of him. I needed information. How many bad guys were there? What weapons did they have? I knew at one point in my life, Mario and I had a pretty good connection. We

were like twins, even though we looked nothing alike. We could finish each other's sentences and, at times, predict the other's movements. I stared at Mario a few extra beats, and then...

There! He shifted his eyes in my direction for a split second. He knew my position, but there was no way for him to communicate what I needed to know.

A tremendous clang vibrated the wall behind my back, and I moved forward a few inches, afraid someone had spotted me.

"I can't take this anymore!" Another man screamed until his voice cracked.

I could hear a piece of metal scrape against the pavement. Was this guy holding a shovel? And was he threatening Nick with it?

"This fucking rich dick thinks he can just throw his money around and walk out of here and go back to his perfect life on his estate. Fuck him. I say we chop them up with the edge of this shovel blade and then let my pack of hunting dogs eat them for dinner."

Nick didn't respond. No one did for a few seconds. I poked my head around and saw Mario staring straight ahead, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"That is not the plan," the first man with the slight accent said.

"Fuck that!" the wild man roared. I then heard the shovel connecting with other metal objects. It was so loud I wanted to cover my ears. He yelled after each blow.

"Stop!" the first man yelled, just as a man with crazy, wild-ass hair came into view. He was about to smash his shovel into Mario's Jeep, but stopped with the tool over his head.

With muscles bulging out from under his leather vest, he dwarfed Mario and his Jeep. But it was the hair that made him look like a monster.

"Back off or I will have to dock you again," said the first man, sounding calm but firm.

Wild Hair tossed the shovel toward me; it clanged to a stop about ten feet from where I stood. Then he turned and walked back into the garage area. A moment later, Nick appeared with the kid's arm draped over his shoulder. Blood was everywhere, the kid's face an unrecognizable mess. He was barefoot, and his legs looked like they'd been run over by a lawnmower. Mario held the door open for Nick, but before he could get the kid in the back of the Jeep, the man in charge showed his face. It was Ricardo Bolivar. His hair was slicked back in a ponytail, and he was dressed in a dark suit with a small cape.

"Mr. Spencer, you, and especially your son, know what we are capable of. If you lead the authorities back to us, I will let this dog loose," he said, gesturing toward the man with the crazy hair, "and he will make your entire family pay in ways you can't possibly imagine. Now get the fuck out of here!" He turned around and walked toward a number of laughing voices. Who knew how many he had in his crew?

I watched Nick load Kyle into the back seat, and then they got into the car and pulled away.

Phase One had been completed. But we were far from safe.

After Mario and Nick had safely picked up Kyle and we had him airlifted to a military hospital in San Antonio, I waited in the DEA safe house for morning to arrive. Raul paced back and forth. I slurped down one energy drink after another. I felt like crap, and for a moment, I was actually envious of Nick's healthy new rituals.

I heard the echo of my slurp in an empty can. "You got any more of these Jumpstarts?" I asked, holding the can a few inches from my mouth.

"Fridge is full of them," he said.

I could see the stress in his knuckles as he gripped his phone.

"By the way, it's called Kickstart."

"Whatever." I crushed the can and set it on the table next to three others just like it. I could see my phone buzzing and jittering across the wooden table. It was Archie. When I asked where he was, he summoned me to room 215 at the motel with the blue roof off the main drag on the island.

When I got there, the door was partially ajar. I drew my Glock and nudged the door open.

"Howdy," he said with a big grin on his face. But my eyes were drawn to his midsection. All I could think was...*wow!* Even in my beaten-down state, I could feel blood coursing through my veins at a faster clip. I quickly picked up the polyester bedcover and threw it over him. And then I looked at his face with the cheesy smile and perm hairdo, and my sex needle dropped like a brick.

"First of all, how did you call me if you're cuffed?"

"Eh, do I have to tell you?"

I hoped he wasn't about to tell me he used another appendage. "Just tell me, dammit."

"I yelled for two hours straight, then finally a lady walked in. She was a... working girl, you might say. But she, uh...admired my package. So, I exchanged a phone call for—"

"Stop right there, sir." I turned away. "What the hell is going on anyway?"

"It's Cynthia. She cuffed me to this headboard after she had sex with me."

I turned around while squinting my eyes in disbelief. "You were able to close the deal with one of the prettiest young women in the Valley? And you're trying to tell me you did it a second time with..." I couldn't even finish the sentence.

He nodded, once again showing me a toothy smile.

"So your dream came true. Why call me?"

"Well, I think Cynthia might have used me a bit."

I planted a hand on my hip. "How so?"

"When we were doing our thing, I happened to share a bit of our plan."

"Which bit?"

"Every?" He said this as more of a question. But the real question was whether I was just going to leave him in the motel cuffed to the bed.

"Hey, I can see you're pissed. I am too, despite my lucky night. Ha-ha."

I crossed my arms and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Alex, this is important. I'm not joking. Cynthia, I've learned, is a bit of a nut job."

"Again, you use the word 'bit.' How much is a bit this time?"

"Not as much as the last time."

"Archie, your stupidity is confusing me."

"Okay, okay. Cynthia's sister is the woman that the boys saw. You know, Trent and Ryan."

"So they are related?"

He nodded. "Not just a sister, but a twin sister."

I pointed an accusatory finger at Archie. "Is Cynthia part of this crime ring too?"

"No, but she's definitely sharing the DNA. She told me she's been working her sister for months, trying to convince her to wear a camera and get the inside scoop on Bolivar, the unknown leader of this outfit, the whole deal. But her sister wouldn't do it. So, Cynthia essentially kidnapped her sister, made her tell her about the next rave at the party house tonight."

"So she had sex with you so she could get information for her story?"

"Uh, I think so. After she cuffed me, I watched her put on a dress that made her look just like her sister, whose name is Luvina, by the way. I also watched her put this fake mole on her face. She was heading to the rave a couple of hours ago. We need to save her."

"Who needs saving?"

He tugged on the cuffs. "Good point. Uncuff me first, then we need to make sure she's safe."

I did the dirty deed and left him in the room, saying on my way out, "I'll get ahold of Raul and see what he can do about Cynthia. He has men on the inside at the party."

Raul and I spoke before I made it to my car. He said he had no other choice than to send Mario to the party to ensure Cynthia's safety. I made my way back to the DEA safe house. After another tense, two-hour wait, I changed into my workout clothes. As I headed out the door, Raul's phone rang. It was Mario. He'd been in a car crash and was calling from the side of the road. Raul put his phone on speaker. "Bolivar had me drive his car, and he was in the back seat trying to rape Cynthia," Mario said. "He'd caught on to her and was going to teach her a lesson. I couldn't let him do it."

"I'm glad you're okay," I said.

"Just a few cuts and bruises. Bolivar, on the other hand, is in bad shape.

After the car stopped turning over, Cynthia used her spiked heel to kick him in the crotch repeatedly. I had to peel her off him. I think she might have a screw loose.”

“That’s what Archie said.”

Archie’s junk—of all the things to be stuck in my brain. I tied my shoes and then restarted my jog toward the levee about half a mile off in the distance, the glow of the morning sun casting an orange hue on a few thin clouds where the ocean met the horizon. I wore one of my jogging outfits, purple and gold the colors of choice. Earbuds were in my ears, and my phone was secured behind a vinyl case that was Velcroed to my arm. I looked like a normal early-morning jogger hoping to get in a good workout before the heat and humidity became too oppressive. I’d already passed a few joggers—three women and two men—all of them giving courteous nods. No one stood out or seemed the type to lead an international drug-smuggling and -distribution operation.

Then again, I wasn’t sure what that person would look like.

Dad had provided the general location of the drop, where money was left in some type of lobster cage hanging off the levee. We had no intel on who would be leaving the money, although the recipient was the big fish we were after: Boss Man.

Another picture of Archie lying on the bed swooped through my mind as I noticed a jogger approaching me. He was middle-aged with a nice V-shaped physique. At the last second, he smiled and winked. I glanced back as he passed me. Had he been trying to flirt with me, even in my disheveled state?

Worse things could happen.

My phone buzzed with a text. I stopped, pulled it from the casing and read the group message from Gretchen:

ALERT – voice recognition SW just came back with real identity of captain rex. Goes by rex ukrop, but real name is Reginald Yancy. Sportswriter in San Saba up to five years ago, then crossed border into Mexico and fell off scene. Just received intel back from Mexican police saying he was arrested once while in Mexico for cavorting with known drug smugglers.

I stopped reading. It all made sense. Captain Rex was practically a folk hero on the island. No one questioned his purpose, what he was really doing. Everyone, including me, just thought he was a little crazy for chasing after the location of the money from the Brinks robbery. He was supposedly writing a book, which obviously made him appear even less imposing.

I caught a waft of pungent aftershave a tick before gorilla-sized hands clasped my arms. Then I could feel him press against my body from behind. “You...you have cost me a lot of money,” Yancy whispered in my ear.

I tried to wiggle, but he had a death grip on me. I darted my eyes around, but no one was nearby.

“I know your name, Yancy. You’re responsible for all of this violence,

and the party house. You killed my friend!”

“Shut your trap, bitch.” I could feel him pull back and shift his hairy face back and forth as he surveyed the area.

“Your friend was one of my best money launderers. She, like so many others, like your dad and his addict girlfriend...they can’t get enough of the greenback. But Teresa started taking more than her cut, and I do not appreciate dishonest people in my business. No place for dishonesty in the business world.”

I could hear his breathing cadence increase. He was worked up.

“If you turn yourself in, share everything about your contacts, how you operated, we might be able to save you from the electric chair.”

He removed a hand, and a second later, I felt the barrel of a pistol in my back. He jerked me away from the beach. “Walk to the parking lot. And if you start to run off, I’ll fill you with lead. You should be a nice bargaining chip as I make my escape and restart my little business from another port.” He chuckled a couple of times as we trudged through the deeper sand. I tried to think about my options, but nothing came to mind. While I was quicker than Yancy, I couldn’t outrun a bullet, and the sand would neutralize my speed anyway.

My only hope was to look for an opportunity as we got to the parking lot. I definitely couldn’t get in his car. If that happened, I’d be writing my own death certificate.

“Hey, Alex!”

I glanced up to see Archie waving his hands, running toward us, saying something about Cynthia and him...getting married?

Yancy stopped, but didn’t say a word. I could feel it. He was going to wait until Archie got closer and then shoot him. I didn’t think it was possible, but his grip tightened, nearly cutting off the blood flow to my arm.

“Don’t flinch or give that dipshit any reason not to run right into my forty caliber bullet,” Yancy said, his whiskers brushing against my ear.

“Alex, everything okay?” Archie said, closing at about fifty feet.

I didn’t respond. Could he see my expression in the reduced morning light? I looked up, then glanced back down about six times—anything to give him pause. He was ex-CIA; he should be able to sense imminent danger.

But then I remembered I was talking about one of the most self-absorbed people on the planet, and I lost all hope that I could save his life, let alone mine.

The barrel of the gun dug into the small of my back. Yancy’s breathing cadence tripled in no time. It was obvious he was under pressure, and all he could do was exert more energy in anticipation of taking down Archie.

“Are you and Captain Rex now dating?” Archie asked as he moved closer. “I’m cool with the whole age-gap thing. Kind of like Cynthia and me, except I don’t look like a fat walrus wrapped in a white, wrinkled sack.”

I could feel the gun slide away from my back. I yelled out just as Archie

stepped on a sand crab, causing him to leap into the air. Yancy threw me aside while lifting his gun. The shot missed Archie, but hit a car headlight in the distance behind him. Archie then dove to his left as Yancy fired two more shots. I pushed off the ground and put everything I had into a right cross off his chin. He barely moved. Then he swatted me with the back of his hand like I was a pesky flea. He fired two more shots at Archie, and I heard Archie cry out. Yancy stopped for a second. I tasted copper from the bloody lip he'd given me. I looked up; his back was turned to me. I jumped up and swung my foot up between his legs until I hit meat.

His instant yelp signaled a direct connection, but he didn't crumble to the sand. He teetered for a second, while turning toward me, his face a hairball of pain. He raised the gun, and his lips turned up at the corners. "Why delay the inevitable? It's time to kill you, bitch, and move on."

The gun fired, and every muscle in my body clenched as I closed my eyes. But I didn't feel anything. I opened my eyes and saw blood spewing out of Yancy's mouth, his eyes dancing uncontrollably. As he dropped the gun, he put a hand to his chest, where blood seeped through his fingers. He coughed, and more blood gushed out onto the sand.

"Archie," I called out.

Yancy passed out and tumbled to the sand.

I could see Archie with a wound in his arm but pointing his massive pistol to the sky. "Cynthia named my gun. She calls it Long Duck Dong."

I'd never been so happy to see his goofy grin.

"I could have sworn we buried your ankle bracelet right around here." Mario rotated his arm, drawing an imaginary circle about ten feet in diameter.

"Remember we said it was right in front of the lamp post off that deck?"

Holding my sandals in my hand, I stopped and looked up and down the beach, the evening sun dipping below a stack of condos behind Mario. "That's not what I remember."

"Hmm," he said, continuing to walk.

We'd been walking and talking for almost an hour. He'd asked to spend some time with me before my flight took me back to Boston, back to my family. I wondered if I might feel a spark, but nothing happened. We were comfortable around each other, but it was friendly, nothing more and nothing less.

"So you know everything about me, Mario. What have you been up to in the last two decades, besides being a kick-ass DEA agent?" I smiled, but his eyes looked down to the wet sand.

"You don't have to tell me. It's okay. I know I haven't been a very good friend."

"Eh, I never reached out to you either, even though I thought about it a lot, especially those first couple of years after you left."

I nudged his arm. "You missed me?"

"Yeah, but something else was going on."

I paused and let him share it at his own speed.

"I..." He exhaled. "I started running with the wrong crowd, got in trouble a few times. And I got hooked on coke. It took me about three or four years to get my act under control. It was tough."

"I'm sorry. Man, I'm really sorry." I touched his arm, and his jaw flexed a bit.

"Life got a lot better. Found a great girl, got married. I have three great kids, ages sixteen, thirteen, and nine."

"Cool, although two teens might be rough at the same time."

He stopped and then turned to look me in the eye. "I fell off the wagon five years ago. Wife left me, and I thought my life had ended. But Raul took me under his wing, got me help. And I've been clean ever since."

"I'm proud of you, Mario. Can't be easy battling those demons every day."

"True. Life isn't easy. I got divorced, and now I see my kids half the time, if I'm lucky. But my job gives me purpose and helps remind me why these fucking drugs are so bad. I'll do anything to keep my kids away from them."

We kept walking. After a few minutes, we started up with the high school stories again, embellished a couple of degrees. We reached the levee and

climbed to the top of the stones and just stood there, letting the warm breeze blow against our faces as the ocean churned whitecaps.

There had been a lot of activity in the two days since Yancy was killed. Dad and Carly were trying to figure out a way to not serve time. Cynthia Gomez was deemed a local hero, as was Archie. From what Archie said, she'd received a call from a national network...and instantly acted like he had VD. Archie claimed he was back on the market. I told him I'd ask Jerry to send a warning to all local law officials. I got a big grin with that one.

Raul and Mario were able to expose the entire drug operation, which had apparently begun to lay roots in college campuses throughout the Southwest. Sadly, down in Mexico, local officials found a mass gravesite. Among the dead was a missing American college student, Cameron Gurlich.

I thought about my life, my kids, and how I'd been influenced by my past. I still had some work left to truly come to terms with my dad and all the pain he had caused. I gazed across the endless blue ocean and watched two seagulls gliding a few feet above the choppy waters. Despite all I had endured, all that I had witnessed, I was still kicking. Stronger than ever, in fact. I actually felt at peace with myself. And life couldn't get much better than that.

ALSO BY JOHN W. MEFFORD

Redemption Thriller Series

The Alex Troutt Thrillers

AT Bay (Book 1)

AT Large (Book 2)

AT Once (Book 3)

AT Dawn (Book 4)

AT Dusk (Book 5)

AT Last (Book 6)

The Ivy Nash Thrillers

IN Defiance (Book 7)

IN Pursuit (Book 8)

IN Doubt (Book 9)

Break IN (Book 10)

IN Control (Book 11)

IN The End (Book 12)

The Ozzie Novak Thrillers

ON Edge (Book 13)

Game ON (Book 14)

ON The Rocks (Book 15)

Shame ON You (Book 16)

ON Fire (Book 17)

ON The Run (Book 18)

Note from the author:

Thank you for reading this latest Alex Troutt adventure.

Did you enjoy *AT Dawn*?

It would be great if you could leave a quick review on Amazon. I would appreciate it. Here's the easy link: <http://smarturl.it/ATDawn>

Next In The Redemption Thriller Series – AT Dusk

A little boy makes his first kill—and he likes it.

He is cunning, charming, and without remorse.

He is a sociopath.

And then he becomes a man.

Alex tracks a homicidal maniac, yet the evidence doesn't line up.

Could there be more than one killer?

She knows she's being played, but by whom? And for what twisted purpose?

When the cold hand of death touches her family, all bets are off.

It's a frantic race to stop a manipulative killer...before the blood bath reaches haunting proportions.

AT Dusk is the fifth Alex Troutt Thriller (Redemption Thriller Series #5).
An excerpt is just below.

Excerpt from AT Dusk (Book 5)

1

Thirty years ago

Racing across the yard, his breathing came in short bursts. He could hardly suppress his excitement.

He swung open the screen door until it smacked against the cracked siding on the old home and barreled into the kitchen, eager to share what he'd found in the backyard. He was only ten years old, but he'd always been perceptive enough to recognize an opportunity, especially one that showcased one of his many talents.

Darting into the living room, he found his mother cutting out coupons, one of her daily routines to save the family a buck or two. Her brow was furrowed over her dark eyes as she went about her task. She looked up at him, and her smooth, almost pasty-white complexion coiled into a prune as she swatted her hand across her face. "Take that thing out to the garage. It smells to high heaven."

He held the dead squirrel by its tail, its gray and brown carcass already stiffening. "You said the next time I found one, you'd let me do my artwork." He knew he sounded like a whiner, but she had promised.

"I never said you couldn't practice your new skills, Junior." She placed her scissors on the coffee table and folded her hands on her lap. "You know how much I've encouraged you to learn new things. You've mastered so much already. Come on, let me hear it," she said with a smile that had always been able to cajole him into anything.

"Vous êtes la plus grande mère du monde."

She brought her hands to her mouth, her grimace quickly replaced by an expression of happiness. "Such flattery," she said, even though he'd said the same phrase to her for the last two years. "Now, go put that stinky thing in the garage. After you practice your piano for thirty minutes, then I'll help you get started on your new project."

He thought about debating the order of the tasks, but he knew it would do no good. He had another plan, a backup he'd used countless other times. Scooting outside, he tossed his new friend over by the tree. Then he scampered back into the house and made his way into what his mother affectionately called the music room. He peered over the top of the piano to ensure all was clear, then he opened the piano bench, shuffled sheet music to the side, and pulled out a tape recorder. He set it on the bench, rewound the

cassette, then punched the play button. A Chopin number he'd recorded a week earlier bounced off the walls. It was called "Ballade No. 1 in G Minor," and he knew it would calm his always-anxious mother. He couldn't help but smile, not only at his talent but also his *ingenuity*. His mother had taught him that word, along with a host of other words and phrases outside of his regular schoolwork. Anything to make him more learned and worldly, she often said.

He quietly slipped through the back door, picked up his dead squirrel, and took it into the garage, where a table was set up for his craft. His tools were holstered in a leather pouch that hung from a hook on the side of the table. Reaching above his head, he pulled a string to turn on a single lightbulb just above his workstation. He popped his knuckles and then rummaged through the tool pouch, searching for just the right instrument. He picked up an X-Acto blade and twirled it between his fingers, a spear of light gleaming off the clean, flat surface. Then he went to work, pulling skin and tissue away from muscle, ligaments, and bone. He worked meticulously, ensuring the layers of skin were not damaged. He could envision himself a few years from now performing surgery on a human, as one of the world's renowned open-heart surgeons. But for now, he'd hone his skills on animals.

"Junior."

His breath caught in his throat. He froze, the blade still clinging to the squirrel's exposed skin.

For the next ten minutes, his mother chided him for lying. He stood like a statue, looking straight ahead, but occasionally peeking at his work of art. As her voice droned on forever, it took everything in his power not to rush back and continue his work—what he realized had become more of his passion.

Finally, the endless speech about how to act like a gentleman ceased. And as usual, she leaned over, stared him in the eyes, and then pinched his cheek. "I can't stay mad at my boy long. You're just too good, too smart. Let me watch you perform your work. And remember, it's all about mastering whatever you do. You have the aptitude to do great things, to be the best the world has ever seen. You must think and behave like a winner—a boy who will grow to be one of the great leaders of his generation."

"Yes, Mother," he said graciously. Then he popped his knuckles and went back to work.

He'd studied under some of the most experienced taxidermists in the tri-state area, and there was no uncertainty in his movements. He had no problem asking his mother to help. He knew he just had to act in a cordial manner, and she would gladly take on the role of his assistant, following his instructions with each precise task.

Among the many instruments at his disposal, he used a sharpened spoon to scoop out the brains and a #15 scalpel blade to carefully sever each of the six muscles holding each eyeball in its socket, ensuring the delicate eyelids would not be damaged. All very important steps, and all necessary to create a believable final product.

Two hours later he had finished his work, at least the portion he could complete without taking a trip with his mother. His heart ticked faster in anticipation of the conclusive step of the process. "You said you'd take me to the taxidermy and shop for a pair of eyes, right?"

"Wash up, and I'll take you there," she said.

An hour later, the boy was transfixed on deer and buffalo mounted to the walls of the shop. Mr. Trimble, the owner of the shop, stood behind the counter, pointing out various options of eyes. "Those over there, they are the most authentic. It will seem like your little squirrel friend is alive. His eyes will appear to follow you across the room."

"Wow," the boy said. He knew he had to have that pair. He looked at his mother. Her lips were pinched together as she stared at the white price tag taped to the counter.

"Junior, I can teach you how to sew in a pair of old buttons."

"But you said I could get eyes for my squirrel," he said as his blood boiled warmer under his skin.

She took in a measured breath, glanced again at the price tag, and then pinched the boy's cheek. "I'm sorry, but it's not something we can afford right now. It will be okay. Some day you will be a real surgeon, and then you can use the finest instruments to save lives."

They went home, and she taught Junior how to sew. At the end of their session, she asked if he was ready to attempt the exercise on his squirrel.

"No thanks. I'll wait. Maybe another day."

"Suit yourself," she said, picking up her pair of scissors to restart her coupon-cutting campaign. "By the way, where did you find the squirrel? I'm wondering if you have other specimens you could work on."

He pondered the question. "Found him near the edge of the woods out back. I guess he just died of natural causes."

The boy thought about the feeling of crushing the throat of the small animal. It had been euphoric. He knew the passion would never leave him.

There was no way in hell I'd let him get away.

Just between the thick foliage, I spotted flashes of blue, and my heart momentarily redlined. I had him in my sights.

I motored up the incline and whipped around the dirt embankment, taking a high angle to maintain top speed, my legs chugging as hard as they could go on my off-road bike. Looking more like a jockey than a weekend workout warrior, I lifted my butt off the seat to absorb the quick drop back to the path, the deep-tread tires spitting up gravel and dirt.

A scream from up ahead. Instinctively, I pushed up to a standing position on my pedals. The voice echoed off the trees. It was Brad, playfully mocking me for not being able to keep up.

We'd been going at it for a good ten miles, and up until the last cross street, I'd kept him within four bike lengths. But when a Great Dane broke free from its owner and galloped right in front of my path, I had to take evasive action—clamping down on the rear brake and leaving rubber on the concrete. My front tire came within an inch of ramming him, but the dog barely turned its head as slobber sprayed off its wagging tongue. I somehow stayed upright. After glancing over his shoulder to ensure I was okay, Brad started chuckling as he pulled away.

My colleague at the Boston FBI office and the man of my affection was dead meat.

I approached the area I called Slalom City, a series of quick curves marked by giant trees, where a miscalculation could destroy a bike and break a few bones. I used it to make up time. Leaning into the first bend, I never stopped pumping the pedals, and I hit the next turn two seconds later, moving at nearly an uncontrollable speed. But I knew my limits, and I knew this course like the back of my hand.

I zigged in and out of turns three and four, then gripped the handlebars with everything I had as the bike rumbled over a series of five stumps. Safely out of Slalom City, yellow spears of sunlight bounced off branches and leaves, peppering my sights. Brad wasn't far ahead. I could practically smell him.

Around one more bend, and I hit the final stretch. I could see his blue jersey near the top. I had closed the gap, but he was still a good fifty feet in front of me. He disappeared over the ridge as I hit the halfway point up the hill. Not letting up for a moment, the legs on my five-six frame churned like pistons on an engine. I was moving so fast when I hit the top, the bike went airborne for a split second.

My weight fell forward as the front tire came back to earth. Looking ahead, I saw Brad zipping out of the woods and gliding across the street. On the other side, he spun around to face me. I could see his smug but very cute

dimples from twenty yards. Still motoring at breakneck speed coming down the final hill, I planned on flying right by him, just to show him how lucky he was the Great Dane had saved him from humiliation.

As I released a smile, his eyes popped out of his head. He flapped his arms and screamed something.

For a split second, I didn't know what he was saying or doing.

I began to turn my head, just a few feet before my front tire hit pavement.

It was too late. A black SUV that looked to be the size of a tank was barreling down the road, headed right for me. I crunched the brakes and started to skid. Another two seconds and I was going to be a grease spot under the SUV's giant wheels. I did the only thing I could do—I bailed.

I jumped off the bike and threw my arms in front of me to stop the forward motion of my body. But I didn't slow. The pavement came up and ripped me to shreds as I bounced off the unforgiving surface. I smelled something awful at the exact moment I heard tires screeching.

Still tumbling across the ground, I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for two tons of metal to send me to another world.

When my body finally stopped, I realized I hadn't been hit. I opened my eyes to see a grill about three inches in front of my face. Brad came running up, shouting all sorts of expletives at the driver.

"I stopped my momentum, Brad," was all I could think of saying, though I wondered if I was still whole.

"Jesus, Alex, you scared the shit out of me. Are you okay?" He touched my forehead as a look of concern cut across his face. He then saw the palm of my hand, and his eyes got wide.

"We're going to the ER." He pulled out his phone and made a call as the driver approached me.

"Shit, lady, I'm glad you're okay. Well, I guess you're okay, right?" he said as he eyeballed me. "But what the hell were you thinking, the way you were flying on that bike? Damn, you almost gave me a heart attack."

Needle-like pains shot throughout my body. I didn't know what to say. I just held up my hand about a foot from the man's face.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and then he fainted.

The name tag on his white coat said Dr. Bruce Kim. I studied the black etching on the gray, plastic background of the name tag with as much focus as I could muster.

"I realize the local anesthesia sometimes doesn't work very well," the doctor said, pausing for a second while he moved a metal instrument inside the cavity of my hand, ostensibly to remove a number of small pebbles and pavement fragments.

I kept my eyes looking straight at his chest.

"I can see your jaw muscles flinching." He continued to stare at me while the instrument remained beneath the surface of my skin.

"Finish. The. Job." My lips barely moved. I didn't want to move anything until he removed the metal device.

He must have seen a desperate but determined Alex Troutt. Dr. Kim went back to work, and a moment later I heard an object *ping* against a metal plate.

Another pause and then I could feel his stare. "Do you want a towel to bite down on?"

Laughter sounded from the other side of the curtain. Shifting my eyes above Dr. Kim's shoulder to the crack where two curtains came together, I spotted Brad's dimpled face laughing hysterically with some woman—a beautiful woman with a river of black curls spilling across her back. Even in blue scrubs, her figure could have been the template for an hourglass. I swallowed, trying not to let a hint of jealousy enter my mind while I sat there and let Dr. Kim perform surgery on me without the benefit of sedation.

"I'll take that towel," I said.

The doctor handed it to me, and I shoved it in my mouth just before Brad peeked his head inside our ER bay. "Doing okay?" He was no longer laughing, his tone caring and sincere. I tried to speak, but it came out as more of a growl.

He walked inside and gently touched my elbow. "I'm sorry about not being right here for you. I just—"

"Stay still," the doctor said.

I stayed so still for the next minute I forgot to breathe. I heard two more clinks in the tray, and then he said, "I think we're finally done." He poured antiseptic into the palm of my hand, then pressed gauze pads on top of the wound. He pulled off his rubber gloves. "Sorry if that hurt. Really no other option. Didn't think you wanted us to schedule surgery to remove a few pieces of rock."

I removed the towel and gave it to Brad. "I'm good." It felt like a jackhammer had done a number on my spine and neck, and I began to reach over my back to rub it.

“Here, let me,” Brad said.

I exhaled. “So, who were you talking to?”

“Oh, that was Sophie. I used to go to high school with her younger sister. Just catching up a little.”

The hot nurse—the one who looked to be at least eight years my junior—had a *younger* sister. Then again, I was dating a man who was eleven years younger than I was. Well, some might argue the term “dating.” We’d spent a lot of time working out together, doing things with my two teenage kids, and we’d been able to sneak out to see a couple of movies in the two months since the kids and I had returned from summer vacation. While we were still moving at a snail’s pace—I’d somehow found the willpower to avoid tripping into the sack with my younger, athletic half—the relationship was just what a doctor would have ordered. Brad was a caring, gentle soul with the body of a Greek god. So, what was I afraid of?

“Now, you need to make sure you keep this wound clean and out of any type of dirty water. Infection is my main concern.” The doctor used the toe of his shoe to tap open the metal trash bin, tossing in his rubber gloves. “We’ll bandage you up, but you’ll need to change it every couple of days.”

“No problem,” Brad said. “But why don’t you go ahead and sew her up?”

“Can’t. Needs to breathe,” Dr. Kim said as Sophie entered our space.

Did she just—

I know she just winked at Brad. What the—

“Doctor, you’re needed upstairs. I can take care of dressing Miss Troutt’s wound.”

Miss Troutt...as if I were her dear old mother’s friend.

I felt Brad’s hand on my back, gently kneading a couple of knots just below my shoulder blade. I looked up at his penetrating, blueish-gray eyes, and he gave me a reassuring smile. It was obvious that he could sense my anxiety, brought on in part by my brush with death, but mostly because of the swimsuit model and, yes, my renewed sense of inadequacy for being over a decade older than the man I...cared about.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, then I drained my lungs and tried to let my shoulders relax.

Sophie patched up my hand as we talked casually. Turned out she was married with three kids and, frankly, couldn’t stop going on about her husband. How that body had produced three kids, I had no idea, but I tried to ignore her most obvious traits and take her for who she was.

“You’re a lucky woman, Miss Troutt.”

“Alex, please.”

“Of course, Alex,” she said with an affable smirk. “Turns out your boyfriend has always been quite the charmer. Did he tell you he used to read poems to my little sister?”

Brad’s face went flush as he shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say? I’m not a great writer, so I turned to the next best thing. Walt Whitman.”

His embarrassment was endearing, allowing me to recall that he was just as human and flawed as I was. Well, maybe not that flawed.

“So what’s your sister up to now?” I was genuinely a curious person, which probably helped me with my job as an FBI special agent in the Violent Crimes squad.

“Oh, Sara...let’s see now. I think her latest adventure with the Peace Corps has her in Africa...Kenya, I think. She’s working to help create water wells for communities with very little water.”

“Very cool,” Brad said. “She always had that desire to help mankind. I’m sure she’s getting a lot out of the experience.”

Sophie nodded once and gave him a tight-lipped smile. Was there something she wasn’t telling us?

She began to clean up the mess as Brad’s cell phone started ringing. He pointed at it. “It’s the office.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Says the woman who works in seventy-two-hour shifts.” He winked, then leaned over and kissed my cheek. I could feel a tingle in my stomach. We typically avoided public displays of affection, but that felt nice—normal in a way that made me think I didn’t really care what people thought. He put the cell phone to his ear, a finger in the opposite one, and meandered outside of the curtain to take the call.

“He’s the one who got away,” Sophie said with her back to me over at the sink.

“You’re talking to me?”

She flipped around and leaned her perfect derriere against the counter while using a paper towel to dry off her hands.

“Brad. He’s...” Her almond-shaped eyes drifted toward the corner. “I’m not sure I really want to go down memory lane.”

An awkward silence engulfed our space as I considered her little tease. Should I take the bait?

“What’s on your mind, Sophie?”

She cleared her throat, as if she suddenly needed a drink of water, then she released an audible breath. “I was just going to say...you know, girl to girl, that he was the one who got away.” She looked longingly at the curtain, as if she were picturing the ghost of Brad standing right there.

I still couldn’t get a bead on what she was trying to say. “Sara...was she the one who actually had a case of puppy love for Brad back in the day, or was it you?”

“You can see it in my eyes?”

“And then some.” I arched an eyebrow.

Another couple of ticks of silence.

“It’s actually much more complicated than just puppy love,” she said as tears pooled in her eyes. She brushed a thumb under one eye, ensuring her mascara didn’t smear.

I didn't say a word, knowing she was about to tell me everything.

"I always admired Brad. He treated Sara with respect, as an equal. Not like some of those hunky athletes in high school who demand everyone, including their girlfriends, build up their egos. Brad was different. Very different."

I really didn't know a lot about Brad's younger life, other than he was raised solely by his mother. His dad had taken off when he was too young to recall, never to return. I also knew he played sports, but he never talked much about those days. So much of our relationship had been about me coming to terms with who I was—my past relationship with my cheating husband, the hunt for his killer, and then the aftermath, including how my kids were dealing with not having a father around. Perhaps I'd been too selfish, always talking about me.

"Brad's a good guy. I can see it when he interacts with my kids."

Sophie's lips drew a straight line. She had more to unload, and I happened to be the one standing right there.

"It all happened one night when I came back from college. Sara was going to drag Brad to one of her youth leadership meetings." She paused, probably wondering if I had any response to her strong opinion. I kept a good poker face, although with Brad being involved somehow, I could also feel my gut beginning to tighten.

"I convinced her to let Brad come with me to one of my friend's parties."

"A college party."

"One of those, yes." She glanced at the curtain again.

I wondered if she wished Brad would walk back into our space, allowing her to end the soul-searching.

"My friend put together a wicked brew of Trash Can Punch. It was the best and the worst at the same time." Another pause. "Brad wasn't much of a drinker, but I convinced him to have a cup. And then another. I did the same thing. A few hours later, after multiple cups of punch, I woke up in bed with him. We were both undressed. And yes, we had...you know."

She obviously wasn't trying to become my best friend. Ten years ago or not, this wasn't really something I wanted to hear. I turned on the gurney and picked up my phone.

"I had seduced him, I guess because he was the forbidden fruit, or maybe because I thought I could teach him something. Or maybe I had some type of odd jealousy with my sister. But it happened, and I felt like shit."

"Sorry." I was ready to move on, so I tried to flex my injured hand. A sharp pain screamed from the middle of my palm.

"That was just the beginning of the worst night of Sara's life. Mine too." She exhaled, and I could see her jaw quivering. She had my attention.

"Sara had gone to her meeting with her best friend, Annie. It was a meeting of the Future Leaders of the World, the FLW, where they focused on trying to aid people who had the least in the world. Sara and Annie were

pretty inseparable throughout high school. In fact, Annie was often the third wheel with Sara and Brad, but he never seemed to mind.”

“And?”

“After the regular meeting ended, Sara had to stay late, since she was an officer. Annie needed to get home. Her parents had a pretty strict curfew. So she insisted on walking home. Sara had told her to wait for her, and, apparently, she even offered to skip the officers’ meeting and take her home. But Annie insisted on walking home. She was too nice.”

I could feel the hairs on my neck start to stand. “What happened?”

“Annie was killed by a car. A hit-and-run.”

“Oh no,” I said. “And Sara felt guilty.”

“She was devastated. But I think Brad felt even worse.”

“Why?”

“Two-fold. First, while all of this was going on, he was having sex with me, the evil older sister. Second, they all knew that if Brad had been there, he would have given Annie a ride home. He always did things like that, because he’s such a nice guy.”

I could feel my heart sink for the man in my life, the pain in my hand all but a distant memory.

“So, in the middle of Sara’s grief, Brad told her...everything. He felt it was the right thing to do, to be honest. It destroyed her, and him too. They eventually moved on, but it was difficult for everyone.”

I would have never guessed that Brad had endured such pain and remorse. Sophie began to gasp, and tears spilled down her beautiful face. I waved her over and gave her a warm hug.

“Even after all this time, it still hurts. I hate myself for it,” she said as she tried to suppress her sobs.

She pulled back up and snagged a couple of tissues off the counter just as Brad walked around the curtain. He stopped for a second and gave us both a look. I was pretty sure he knew what we had just shared.

“That was Jerry on the phone,” he said, walking to my side. “I’m being put on TDY—temporary duty yonder.”

“I need to get your paperwork ready,” Sophie said to me as she slinked between the curtains and disappeared.

Brad had a stellar reputation in the office as an intelligence analyst, and he was a natural leader of men and women. My respect for his professional side couldn’t be any higher. But as I’d grown closer to “Brad the person,” his professional persona didn’t mean much to me. I realized that Brad the man was far more impressive than Brad the IA.

“Not surprising. If we had a draft for IAs, you’d probably be the first player chosen.”

“Thanks, but this temporary assignment isn’t in our office.”

My back stiffened. “What?”

“It’s in New York City. They need a lead IA on a high-profile case. Their

top analyst just had a baby, so she's out of commission for a while."

I could feel a wave of sadness wash over me. "How long?"

"Hard to say. He's guessing one to two weeks, but it could be longer." He gave me a wink and put his arm around my shoulder. "I'll miss you. Maybe you can come visit me on the weekend?"

I tilted my head back, and he gave me a soft smooch, pressing our lips together for a few seconds. "Thanks," I said, rubbing my good hand across his chest. "I might take you up on your offer."

"I guess you and Sophie talked." He took a single step back.

"Yeah...she still carries a lot of guilt."

"It was tough, especially on her sister. But I guess it's part of life. Impossible to predict."

I reached over and took his hand in mine, my good one. "You and I spend too much time talking about all of my drama. I want to know more about your life."

"I think you just heard it, at least the most dramatic parts."

My phone rang, and I raised a finger. "Now Jerry's calling me? I guess he still hasn't figured out that we're together," I said with a wry smile.

I took the call and listened to Jerry for a good five minutes before I could get a word in. He had to take another call from his boss, so I punched the line dead and set the phone down on the medical table.

"Jerry must have a hundred things going on at once," Brad said, running his fingers through his thick mane of dirty-blond hair.

"This one is big. You know that cold case I've been looking into for the last few weeks? Somerville cops found a dead girl overnight with the same MO. Ten years later, we might have a lead. Looks like it's time for both of us to get to work."

I scooted off the table and was met by Brad's lips. He pressed his body against mine. His pecs nudged my breasts, and his biceps held me tightly. Our tongues danced for a good minute until we both came up for air.

"I..." Brad's sentence trailed off, unfinished, his eyes boring holes into my soul.

"Yeah?" My heart fluttered inside my chest.

"Be safe. And I can't wait to see you again."

I went straight home and took a cold shower—while ensuring my wound stayed dry—then I dove into the dirty work.

A blueberry slipped through Nick's fingers. He swatted his hand at it to catch it, but missed. I threw up my good hand and snatched it out of the air.

"Damn, Alex, you're a regular Rob Gronkowski."

I gave him the eye, not that fond of being compared to the beast of a man who played tight end for the Patriots.

"I meant that you have the *hands* of Gronkowski. Obviously, your body types are different." He chuckled twice, his cheeks instantly glowing as the early morning sun penetrated through a thin veil of fog and bounced off my partner's face. Or were his cheekbones just more pronounced because of all the weight he had lost?

"Thanks," I said with a wink, and then I popped the blueberry in my mouth. An outsider might say our relationship seemed a little on the flirtatious side, but if there was anyone in the squad I could joke with, it was Nick Radowski. For starters, we'd worked together for more years than we'd like to admit. And he was gay. So it was kind of like working with a girlfriend, at least in how we rated any good-looking guys we came across. Nick, though, had been living with the same guy since I joined the FBI. For me, the white-picket dream was still quite elusive, although I couldn't complain these days, with Brad serving as my other half. But something was missing, something that would take our relationship to the next level. It wasn't our ability to connect emotionally—we did fine there. We had fun with each other, and there was mutual respect. All of that was great. Given my dream the previous night, I thought I knew what was needed to cement our relationship and allow us to finally share our bond with the world. S-E-X.

We circled Nick's FBI-issued Impala and made our way toward the outline of yellow police tape.

"You know, that's probably the healthiest thing you've had to eat in the last week," Nick said.

"Screw you. Last night I had a granola bar."

"If it came out of a package, it's still processed food. Have you thought about having some flax for breakfast, along with fresh fruit from an organic farm?"

While I was plenty happy for Nick to take control of his life and get himself in shape, he'd become quite the food snob. On top of that, he now thought he could kick my ass in any type of athletic endeavor.

"I know I need to eat better, Nick, or should I call you Dad?"

"That stings," he said as he lowered himself under the tape.

A few cops milled about the crime scene, despite the fact that the body had been bagged and taken to the Middlesex County medical examiner's office for an autopsy. I wasn't as familiar with the civil servants in Middlesex

County. Normally, we worked hand in hand with Suffolk County, which lined the coast, and the Boston Police Department. We always appreciated a law enforcement agency that had a lot of resources, since Uncle Sam typically pinched pennies within the FBI.

I waved my bandaged hand at one of the uniforms. "I'm looking for a Detective Askew. Know where I can find him?"

He chuckled while sticking his thumbs inside his belt loop. "Her. Detective Askew is a woman."

"Didn't know. Sorry."

"No problem. She's down by the river working with the crime scene investigators."

I gave him a courteous nod, and we followed the dirt path down a hill, through a cluster of dense trees that spilled onto a small inlet that served as a shore. I spotted the only female in the mud and rocks. Wearing rubber boots over what looked like a teal pantsuit, she was speaking to a pot-bellied man who had "Crime Scene Investigation" written in white letters on the back of his windbreaker.

It took a moment, but she noticed us and made her way over. As we shook hands, I noticed her grip was firm, but her hands quite soft. We finished the rudimentary introductions, and I asked if she had seen the body. She turned her head back to the shore, and the wind blew a lock of chestnut hair across her face. While she was probably close to my age, I couldn't spot a flaw on her face. In fact, she was drop-dead gorgeous—in a girl-next-door kind of way.

"I saw it, the body, before it was taken away," she said, hesitating as she looked out across Mystic River, a few remaining puffs of fog clinging to the water. Miniature swells gently lapped over the smooth stones behind the detective.

I waited a good ten seconds or so, then, "Care to share what you saw, Detective?"

"Terri," she said, turning back to me, hands now in her pockets. "Just call me Terri. I've only been a detective for five years, a patrol cop just two years before that. But I've never seen anything like this, nor have I even seen pictures of anything like this."

I could tell she was in shock, trying to make sense of how one person could kill another. We'd all been there, and every new case brought back that same feeling, one I knew all too well. It was as if I had a perpetual case of acid reflux—the taste of my own vomit just another murder away.

I motioned with my hand for her to continue. "Sorry. When I got here, the ME took me right to the body. He pulled back her eyelids—she had no eyes. Someone had cut out her fucking eyes." Terri raked her long fingers through her hair. Even in stress, there was something about her that seemed graceful and radiant at the same time.

Shaking her head, she added, "The officer who was first on the scene has

already asked for a leave of absence. A sick bastard did this. A very sick bastard.”

Nick and I exchanged a knowing glance. I guessed that we both wondered if the little Somerville PD had the resources to take point on this investigation, even if we were riding shotgun.

“Those images stay with you long after the investigation ends. Maybe you need to talk to someone,” I said, knowing just about every department kept at least one shrink on retainer.

“I’m okay. It’s just a job, right?” She smirked, then leaned down and picked up a piece of paper that had blown near her foot.

“Evidence?” I asked.

She held the wrinkled paper closer to her face, squinting her eyes to read it. “Probably not. It’s a receipt from a 7-Eleven dated two years ago, but we’ll bag it just in case.” She whistled at the same cop from earlier, who came over and carefully placed the piece of paper in an evidence bag.

I took another view of the river. In addition to a bunch of trash that had gathered along the shoreline, I couldn’t see six inches deep into the water. It had a sludgy look, as if an oil tanker had just ruptured in the vicinity.

“Damn, when are they ever going to clean up this filth?” Nick said, beating me to it. He waved a hand in front of his face. “Smells like dead fish too.”

“Some plant keeps dumping sewage into the river, and no one does anything about it,” Terri said. “You know how it is, lots of government agencies pointing the finger...cities, water districts, everyone. No one wants to pick up the bill. So we’re stuck in inertia.”

Knowing we weren’t about to solve a government throw-down, I took our focus back to the case. Actually, two cases.

“Not sure if you’re aware, but we were recently assigned a cold case, now about ten years old. The vic also had her eyeballs cut out.”

Terri shook her head, her deep-set eyes narrowing. “How many perps can have the same MO? It’s got to be the same guy, right?”

“Guy, girl, who knows? But your vic got our attention, that’s for certain. What do you know about her?”

“Listen, Agent Trout—”

“If I can call you Terri, you can call me Alex.”

“I know I’m not exactly exuding a ton of confidence right now, but I have passion for my job. I love it and hate it at the same time. So, I guess I’m saying that I’ll be happy to share with you what we know, but we need professional courtesy extended back to us as well. The media and public will be all over us, and we’ll need the extra help.”

“I don’t think so, at least not for the reasons you think,” I said, shifting my feet.

She tilted her head, a quizzical expression on her face.

“The details for cause of death were never released. In fact, the body of

Gloria Lopez was never claimed by any family or friends.”

Terri raised an eyebrow.

“My thoughts exactly,” Nick said.

“So the body your officer found...was it dumped here or did it wash ashore?” I asked.

“Our divers who know the waters, and all the sludge included, are certain the body had drifted downstream.”

I took a step around Nick and scanned the area. I’d missed it when we walked up, but while we were technically next to the Mystic River, we were actually at the connecting point where the northerly Malden River dumped into the Mystic.

“Do we know which branch she came from?”

“Given where her body landed and the currents, the divers think she floated down from the Mystic. How far, no one knows.”

“Unless it was made to look like it came from the Mystic, not the Malden River,” Nick added.

I slapped my partner on the arm and nodded. “Can’t rule it out.”

“We’ve got two teams scanning the shoreline. My Somerville team is walking the shore up to about a half mile on the south side, and the Medford department is scanning both sides of the river up to two miles.”

“Everyone is marking their territory,” I said.

“We all want to find out who did this,” Terri said, sounding a bit annoyed at my jaded perspective.

The CSI person called Terri over, while Nick and I stayed back and compared notes.

“We’re dealing with amateurs,” Nick said in a hushed tone.

I smacked his arm again. “Too far.”

“Okay, we’re dealing with professionals who couldn’t find their asses with both hands. That any better?”

As the T train rumbled across the tracks behind me, I released a smirk and turned my sights westward, up the Mystic River. I recalled the movie of the same name, the story of three boys who were forever jaded by a horrific childhood incident. If memory served me correctly, Sean Penn and Tim Robbins both won Oscars that year. The movie was based on Dennis Lehane’s novel. As usual, the book was better. It was fiction, but there was something about this river that made my stomach turn. Was it the movie alone? Could it be the disgusting water and how it seemed like everyone was afraid to make it better? Maybe. It was almost as if the river carried some type of curse on those who dared to bring it under control.

Terri joined us. “They found a five-dollar bill floating near a rock.”

“I guess anyone could have dropped that,” I said.

“Well, the ME found another five-dollar bill stuck in the vic’s bra.”

I nodded, thinking through the facts she had shared. “Had she been sexually assaulted?”

“Early examination showed nothing pointing to that. He’s doing a more thorough examination today.”

“What else have you learned about the vic?”

“She actually had a driver’s license in the back pocket of her denim skirt. Name is Emma Katic, spelled K-A-T-I-C. Age thirty-two.”

“Russian last name. Recent immigrant?” Nick asked.

“We don’t know that much about her yet. We just now received the opening kickoff.”

A sports analogy. It worked, really. That was exactly what the start of an investigation was like. “Anyway, we do know she was employed at a local bar in Malden—Lenny’s Pub. Sending a team over there this morning to start interviews and do background checks.”

Sounded like something we should handle, but I let it rest, for now.

“You’re thinking something,” Nick said to me.

“Just doing a little comparison to our cold-case vic.”

“Do share,” Terri said.

“Two notable differences. First, our vic was only twenty-one. Much younger,” I said. “Second, she was a prostitute. So, all these years we’ve been wondering if it was one of her customers who had killed her.”

They both nodded as another T train plowed across the bridge, drowning out all sound around us. I counted ten times that the stressed track grunted in protest.

“What was the actual cause of death?” Terri asked.

“Blunt force trauma to the back of her skull. The ME report says they found tiny splinters of wood in her hair.”

“How about Emma?” Nick asked.

“Single GSW to the head.”

We further compared the vics. In addition to the differences in age, profession, and actual cause of death, my cold-case vic had jet-black hair and a tan complexion.

“Doesn’t add up,” Terri said, running her fingers through her hair again. And I thought *I* played with my hair a lot. That appeared to be Terri’s go-to move, whether she was stressed or just pontificating.

“Any way we could be looking at a copycat killer?” Terri asked.

“But the public—” Nick started.

Terri held up a hand to interrupt him. “I know, your cold case was never made public. But a few people knew. The agents working the case, maybe the local detectives at least had awareness. And then, of course, the perp himself.”

“A family member or close friend of the perp. That could be an angle to think about,” I said.

“Don’t discount the idea of a former agent. You hinted earlier how this job can send you to the nuthouse. Maybe one of the good guys went over the deep end and started mimicking an old case.”

As much as I didn’t want to believe it, I knew Terri had every reason to

throw that theory into the mix.

“Good instincts. We’ll definitely start digging on that one, if for no other reason than to rule it out.”

We exchanged phone numbers and agreed to touch base daily, if not more often, as both teams gathered intel and our suspect pool became clearer—assuming we could actually create a list of legitimate suspects.

Nick and I walked up the path and got back in the car. He started the engine, and I said, “I’m calling Gretchen to let her know we need her in the war room when we get back. We’re running short-handed without Brad, but we’ll have to make do.”

Nick gave me the eye, and then a grin cracked his face.

“What?” Was he about to admit he knew about me and Brad?

My phone rang. It was Terri. I punched the line while looking for her out my window.

“You break the case in just the last minute?” I joked.

“Maybe. We just got a tip about a guy who threatened Emma, and he’s got a violent past. We’ve got a team on the way to the guy’s employer.”

I spotted her jogging out from the canopy of trees.

“I see you. We’ll pick you up and drive together.”

Within seconds, Terri slid into the backseat, and Nick hit the gas before she could shut the door.

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